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Put Your Big Girl Panties On and Deal With It...

(the no-nonsense guide to getting what you want)

Roz Van Meter

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(the no-nonsense guide to getting what you want)

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For Robert: lover forever and partner in play



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Introduction



Life itself is the proper binge.
—Julia Child

Becky and her husband Greg were walking through the mall one day, heading for a movie, when a girl walked toward them wearing a T-shirt that said, “Put your big girl panties on and *deal* with it!”

Greg laughed. “Somebody ought to write a book with that title.”

Becky answered, “And I know just the person who could do it, my old buddy back in Dallas.”

The movie they went to see featured Barbra Streisand as a flamboyant red-headed sex therapist named Roz. She was a hoot. As they walked out, Becky looked up at Greg and said sweetly, “Did I happen to mention that my buddy back in Dallas is a flamboyant red-headed sex therapist named Roz?”

They phoned me with the idea, came down from

Colorado to talk about it, and the next thing I knew, I was writing this book.

Big Girl Panties is a story salad. As books will do, it took on a life of its own, informing me as I wrote. I'd started with the attitude of "Big Girl Panties are mature and capable, Little Girl Britches are childish and ineffective." Before long, though, I rediscovered an enormous truth: they are both wonderful and amazing, when worn at the right times.

Our Big Girl part *is* mature, experienced, competent, logical, creative, often wise. She gets the job done, pays bills, makes plans, follows through. When something unexpected happens, she can deal with it. She has a great inner warning system—she checks to see if something fits before she signs on. She is a problem-solver, responsible, accountable. She either knows how to do stuff or learns. Though she can sometimes be overbearing and rigid, you'd want her around to find lost luggage, whip up a last-minute dinner for unexpected guests, pull papers together for a tax audit. She is the one you'd want to take nurturing, protective care of your kids, your pets, your friendship. You can count on her.

The Little Girl part of us is charming, spontaneous, emotional, heartfelt, vulnerable, wide open. At times she has her own kind of wisdom, a sort of intuitive bullshit detector. She also can be impulsive, needy, manipulative. When she wants chocolate, she is laser-beam focused on getting chocolate, and the Big Girl has to keep her from eating the whole box.

When Big Girl gets tired—and she will, oh, she does—Little Girl sends the message, “I / we need to rest.”

Or...ironically...if the Little Girl is scrambling frantically to please everybody and thus get loved and approved of, it's Big Girl who must gently say, “Sweetheart, you need to ease back. You are lovable and loved, whether or not you're producing. You can just *be*. I'll watch while you nap, and I'll protect you from ghoulies and ghosties and long-legged beasts, and things that go bump in the night.”

Am I suggesting that you possess multiple personalities? Of course! You know that. Psychologists call them “varying ego states.” You respond or react differently in various situations or settings. You don't dress or act or even think the same way in church as you do at the beach.

This book's purpose is to help you *choose* which persona is best for you in a given circumstance. You will become more aware of ways you might have been unconsciously sabotaging your goals or relationships, or missing out on some really good lifestuff.

Feel free to laugh at me, by the way. I do, wholeheartedly. I invite you to laugh at yourself, too, not in a scornful or condescending way, but with heartfelt supportive friendship.

I didn't do anything to earn this marvelous gift called life, but I'm damn sure going to celebrate it as long as it lasts.

I hope you do, too.

Chapter One:

Women Rule!



It ain't where you start,
it's where you end up that counts.
—Author unknown

I love women.

Oh, I'm crazy about men too, but there is nothing like a woman who has stormed through her own personal deliverance with guts and gusto and lived to tell the tale to others.

As I think back to some of the women I've counseled through the years and have come to know deeply, I'm still amazed at their courage and creativity.

Some of them are now in their seventies. Others are just starting out. We all have one thing in common: we became fiercely determined to get custody of ourselves.

About Me

At eighteen I was a college sophomore, a determined virgin, and still calling my parents Mummy-Dear and

Daddy-Boy. I know, it gags me too, but you have to remember that emotionally I was about twelve.

Because I was a redhead with big boobs and a bouncy personality, the boys assumed I was easy, which indeed I was until they tried to move beyond enthusiastic kissing. That's when I turned prissy with a vengeance, indignantly demanding to know, "What kind of girl do you think I am?" Actually, it was pretty clear what kind they *hoped* I was, what with the red hair and big boobs and all.

They were wrong, but not for long.

Nine months later (no gestational significance) I was slightly more worldly and in the grips of an overwhelming attack of hormones and romanticism. By this time I had sacrificed my Pearl Without Price to a college boy, so I had to be in love. Just being in lust made you a slut, but getting carried away with a boy you were going to marry (*whether he wanted to or not!*) just meant you were an impulsive little thing.

In short, my Little Girl Britches still ruled me, even when I shucked them for my beloved. It would be years—decades, actually—before I matured enough to have a Big Girl perspective with any kind of consistency.

Nowadays my chosen mission is to help other women know the difference between impulsive, knee-jerk Little Girl *reactions* and Big Girl rational *responses*, and act accordingly.

Being in your Little Girl Britches can be playful fun, but it can also leave you defenseless, make you bratty, or turn you into a Whiny-Britches. Putting on your Big Girl

Knickers can engage your sensible, responsible self, but it can also tempt you to become a judgmental, humorless pain in the neck, squelching your natural exuberance. The trick is to maintain a healthy balance between the two and allow them to appreciate and serve each other.

What about You?

That's what this book is about. How to match up the part of you that's still a Little Kid—who needs a grown-up to take care of her, ride shotgun for her, love her just as she is—and the Big Girl Panty-Wearer who loves the Kid, looks out for her, and takes care of business, whatever it is at that moment.

It also works the other way. Maybe you've been so resolutely adult and responsible that you've lost contact with the playful part that would like to run naked through the sprinkler, stay up too late on a school night, make love by the light of the moon. Or perhaps you've been such a compulsive all-nighter, still trying to please everybody, that you need the thoughtful, caretaking adult part to tell you it's time for a nap, a snack, or the search for your right livelihood.

However you got to Here, whether you're young or old, married or unmarried, divorced or widowed, reasonably smart or brilliant, you don't ever again have to be:

- a victim
- a pleaser
- an over-giver and under-receiver
- a whiner (well, occasionally—but outright bitching is

preferable and more honest)

- a manipulative brat
- an advocate for everybody else but not for yourself
- taken advantage of
- condescended to
- blamed or scapegoated
- made to feel defensive or less-than
- paralyzed with indecision (except temporarily)
- responsible for someone else's happiness
- stuck in have-to's and out of touch with want-to's

For me it was a long journey from there to here, but I finally learned to listen to my insides, factor in the situation, and choose which emotional panties to wear for a given situation. What fun, and how freeing! Most days I reach for my comfy, high-waist cotton numbers. They're *so* comfortable. But I can also switch to naughty G-string gear, should the mood arise.

(I still thoroughly enjoy random indiscretions and naughty scenes with my now-and-forever beloved, Robert.)

Life is unpredictable. You live in a capricious universe you can't control. But there is one thing you *can* control, and that is your *response* to the variety of events, people, and challenges that life throws your way. Whether it's "get over it" or "deal with it," you have the power to reshape your life, at least in part.

Maybe you sometimes feel lost, confused, out-of-control, stuck in mid-life malaise. Perhaps your life got battered by tsunami-like tragedy.

You aren't alone. Here are situations some of my clients found themselves in. Obviously, I've changed the names and exact circumstances, but the flavor is there, and sometimes it's bitter.

Upside Down from an unexpected life change.

Tess always assumed that she and Ted would rock on the porch of the old folks' home together. Then one day he said he was leaving. Maybe he told her that (1) he was gay, or (2) he wanted to "find" himself outside their marriage, or (3) he'd fallen in love with someone, or (4) he just wasn't happy, wasn't interested in counseling, wasn't good enough for her, etc., when the actual truth was (5) all of the above, and he didn't have the balls to tell the truth. At age thirty-seven and without any warning, Tess had to fend for herself. Not only that, but her own family blamed her for what they called her wifely shortcomings. "There's never been a divorce in this family! We're not quitters!" were the words from her mother, who herself was the veteran of a forty-year abusive marriage to an alcoholic.

Stalled in the doldrums, feeling a flatness in your life.

Peg worked hard to raise her kids and help them go after what they wanted in life. Problem was she didn't give herself that same support. Now that they are out in the world and pursuing their dreams, she realizes that she never created a game plan for herself. Conditioned since childhood to be a mother, she has run out of life script.

Stuck in a job or relationship that's sucking your energy.

Helen sensed from the moment she said yes to Paul that it was a mistake, but her family was so thrilled about the upcoming wedding, and the invitations were being printed, and how could Helen disappoint all those people? So they married, and she thought if she just tried harder, he wouldn't be so angry all the time. Besides, he'd had a terrible childhood, and Helen wanted to make him happy. When she occasionally—say, once every three or four years—saw a flash of the man she knew he could be she just tried harder. Finally, after many years of marriage she realized that she could never make someone else happy if he was determined not to be, and she was weary of trying.

Itching for something new, exciting, passionate.

Julie goes from relationship to relationship, each one tantalizingly close to what she wants (if she actually knew what she wanted). She says, "Isn't it funny how when you're looking for something, you always find it in the last place you looked?" Her friends say, "Duh!" and Julie goes on looking outside herself to feel fulfilled. She gets really anxious when she doesn't have a current lover, but that's OK, because it doesn't last long. Her interval between men is approximately the same as how long it takes the car behind you to honk after the light changes.

Yearning to write, paint, act, s-t-r-e-t-c-h creatively

Paulette was just twelve when she won her first writing

contest. Even when she was lonely and depressed in college, making D's in several subjects, she made A's in creative writing. She has always known she has a book inside her: perhaps the story of her immigrant parents or a novel about a girl who . . . well, she isn't sure what the plot would be, but she aches to write. Trouble is, she has stayed so busy working upward in the corporate world, she just "doesn't have time" to pursue her dream. Meanwhile, the whole company is so impressed with her writing skills that she gets to draft the CEO's speeches and all her boss's reports. Paulette tends to drink a little too much and gobbles up books by writers she admires, all the while telling herself that she could never be that good anyway.

Even if you didn't see yourself in these particular settings, I'm sure you can relate to some of the frustration, weariness, sadness, inertia, confusion. How do I know? Because you are a human being, and all the members of our tribe bump up against a washed-out bridge sometimes.

I invite you to use this book as a guide for bootstrapping yourself to a more satisfying life. If following Big Girl Panties suggestions doesn't start you on the road to where you want or need to be, please find a good counselor and start doing the work. It's a better investment than a year at any university in the world.

However, if you're merely stuck, longing for more clarity and choice in your life, here's my challenge. No matter your unique set of circumstances, are you ready to build up—or add to—the emotional underpinnings of your life?

You are the only person in the world qualified or empowered to make these choices. I just want to help you choose deliberately, not from a knee-jerk reaction left over from childhood. Being a whiny-britches, a relentless cutie-pie or, worse, a professional victim, stunts your personal growth and might snuff it out entirely. At the other end of the spectrum, being stuck in Big Girl Britches can keep you in relentless trudging and judging, never getting to the party or the joy.

So come on. Let's rummage around in your drawers, so to speak, and take a look at what to add, appreciate, move around a bit, or discard as hopelessly outdated and horribly unbecoming.

Disclaimer: I've changed details, mixed people's stories together, and sometimes shifted characteristics from one person to another. Obviously, I've changed names in the stories, including my own. This is referred to as covering your ass, which any upright Big Girl needs to do.

Chapter Two:

A Loving Letter



Wisdom can't be taught, but here goes anyway.
—John Bransford, psychologist

Oh Lord! The buck stopped here.

After years of resenting the other guys' decisions I'd had to live with, suddenly every decision was mine, for better or worse. Finally, by my own choice, I was leaving home for the first time.

Like millions of others, as a girl I had gone straight from being somebody's daughter, to somebody's roommate, to somebody's wife, to three somebodies' mother. Now, with my kids on their own trajectories, I was living alone with no one around to nurture—and nurturing was what I'd been programmed to do from doll buggy days to maternity wards. Even when working in offices, selling real estate, copywriting, slogging through graduate school, teaching in colleges, my primary responsibility had always been home.

I'd been so busy trying to take care of everybody else, as well as avoid somebody's displeasure, that I didn't have a clue how to care for the Little Kid inside me.

Out on my own at last, I had to work three jobs just to make the rents on my apartment and office. It was thrilling but scary. How does the joke go? “It’s not falling from a great height I’m afraid of, it’s the sudden stop.”

On alternate days I was defiant (“I can do this myself!”) and paralyzed (“What the hell do I do now?”).

One day, in a rare moment when I had my Big Girl Panties on—that is, feeling clear-headed and grown-up—I wrote a letter to myself, sealed the envelope, and wrote on the front: *In case of depression, break seal.* The letter said:

Hi, Honey.

Since you’re reading this, I guess you’re feeling scared or depressed. Here’s a reminder of why you left [followed by a list of the reasons].

Remember that you didn’t know *what* you were going *TO*, but you knew what you were leaving *FROM*, and you knew that staying any longer would have finished snuffing out your spirit and breaking your heart.

You’re gonna make it, *Babe*. I will always be there for you, and so will a lot of other people. You haven’t met some of them yet, but you will.

Now seal this back up and save it for another rainy day.

Love, Roz

That letter kept me going for several months, along with occasional late-night revelries, random indiscretions (alternating with weeks of hiding out), and eating peanut butter straight from the jar. You could have looked up “rebellious” in your Funk & Wagnalls and found my picture. I was making up for lost time, getting to be the naughty, wayward teenager I’d never had a chance to be. I was such a sweet girl in my youth, you’d need a shot of insulin to go there.

Also, I was trying to get loved, not very competently or successfully, but passionately and sometimes desperately.

Then one day I suddenly had the a-ha! that besides the part of me who really wanted to be loved, there was an even bigger (and at that time still co-dependent) part who just wanted somebody to love. I had so much love to give, I was a walking, sloshing, milk-filled breast.

So I introduced the want-to-be-loved part to the want-somebody-to-love part, and they took to each other joyfully. I have been more or less OK ever since.

Once that internal adoption process began, I did what any new mother would do. I began to put down roots for me and my scared, lonesome Little Kid.

Making a New Nest

I finally lucked out on an apartment.

Oh, there had been plenty for rent, but most were dreadfully interchangeable. Hospital-white paint, builder’s-beige carpets, walls so thin you could hear the relentless pounding of the neighbor’s uber-woofer. Worse still, rental

agents required at least a twelve-month lease. Twelve months? I couldn't think beyond next week. In a kind of diminished-capacity haze, I convinced myself that I needed a month-to-month arrangement while I got my bearings.

Finally I found a small, old, stoutly-built complex where the apartments had been converted to condos, and one was available for month-to-month rent. (There was a very good reason for this, as I was to learn.) Better still, not a speck of hospital white, or if there was, you couldn't see it for parrot-green shag carpet. The only missing touch was off-stage sound effects—loud squawks and monkey whoops and screeches—to complete the rainforest theme. One wall of the dining room even had vinyl wallpaper of enormous fern leaves. I mean, this place was *colorful*.

I loved it and rented it on the spot.

Deeply committed to really starting over, I had brought just some clothes, my typewriter, a few albums, tons of books, and a few pieces of inherited furniture, plus a few garage sale odds and ends. My sofa was a family antique daybed I covered with a dark floral sheet from a close-out bin. A round cardboard table got topped with a big, splashy fabric remnant and held a jazzy lamp from grandma's Roaring Twenties. Under the floating stairs that separated the living and dining rooms, I put the old spool chest that held my family silverware. Hey, I'm from a long line of Southern women; where we go, so goes our silver.

So it went, room by room. A used Sears mattress for a bed, with a door mirror turned sideways and bolted to the wall for a headboard. Pots and pans from yard sales and

the Salvation Army store. Art was old movie posters thumb tacked to the walls. Later, an artist friend painted the stairwell sky blue with white clouds.

Does it sound like a nursery? Or maybe dorm digs? Or, at best, a twenty-year-old's first pad? It was all those things. All the natural, organic stages I'd missed, of growing up and moving out on my own, were wrapped up in one gaudy, darling place. I didn't need anyone else's permission or agreement on any decision. I was finally getting custody of myself.

I found a hippie artist's shop that was going out of business, 80 percent off and they specialized in covering things with mirror. I acquired little mirror boxes, mirror pedestals, etched mirror plaques, a sexy mirror-on-mirror for the powder room. My only other extravagance was jewel-colored glass votive holders, each sitting on a mirror tile and backed by another. I'd light the candles and bring ruby, sapphire, emerald flickers to the room, then settle back with a glass of wine and some favorite music.

Courage through glitz.

Each evening I'd come home from work, walk through the courtyard, open my front door and call out, "Hi, Place!" and Place would seem to vibrate with delight at having me back. On those occasional times when the anxious gollywobbles set in, I had my break-seal letter to remind myself that whatever happens, I can handle it.

And if I can't handle it, I can handle *that*.

Time to Hitch up Those Big-Girl Panties

A few weeks later, the sky began to fall.

The landlords who'd been so accommodating about the month-to-month lease now called to tell me I'd better start packing back up. They were about to put the condo on the market and, ultimately, me on the street.

I begged them not to. I explained that I didn't have the physical, emotional, or financial wherewithal to survive another move. I'd had to borrow money to leave my marriage. I was stony broke. This was my sanctuary. Please, please.

They sympathized. But there was an easy solution, really. Why didn't I just buy the place? The equity was only three thousand dollars, and I could assume their loan. They said the only reason they were selling was because they needed money to pay the IRS, and their CPA had suggested that selling the condo was the best way to raise quick cash.

Phony rationale, of course. What self-respecting CPA would suggest selling a rental unit that provided good write-offs in order to raise a quick three thousand bucks? Probably this had been their plan all along, and it was a good one. Elderly condos weren't selling worth a hoot, but get somebody already in there and then...

It didn't matter. It might as well have been thirty thousand. But I told them I would try.

Family assistance was not feasible. My parents were horrified that I'd actually divorced and had totally written me off.

Every time the Little Kid inside would start to get teary, my Big Girl persona would assure her that everything would be OK, we'll get through this, I'll think of something.

I started making the rounds of banks, which is how I learned that in order to borrow money, you have to mortgage something of equal or greater value. Deeply ignorant of financial matters, I was indignant. Well hell, I thought, that's quite a deal they've got going. They can't lose!

Reminds me of the country girl who moves to the city, becomes a hooker, and writes home ecstatically: "Mom, I've got the perfect job. You got it, you sell it, and you still got it!"

Big Girl Panty-Wearer Saves the Farm

At the last bank in town I finally found a sympathetic loan officer who said, "What kind of furniture do you have?"

"I've got a few nice antiques," I said, "and otherwise just garage sale stuff."

"Well, then, we'll put down your antiques on the paper as collateral."

Me, indignant: "I can't mortgage my grandmother's furniture!"

Him, eyeball-to-eyeball: "Why not? Aren't you planning to make the payments?"

Me: "Hand me that paper!"

And so it came to pass that in the real world, when it got right down to the lick-log, my Big Girl came through.

I paid that second mortgage off in three years and had

a mortgage-burning party to celebrate. By then I had a big support system of buddies. Better still, I'd learned a whole lot about hitching up my Big Girl Panties and taking care of that scared what'll-*we-do*? Little Kid.

These days I've got panty choices. I am no longer hanging on for dear life to a runaway mine train, careening along a dubious track, making good time but clueless as to where I'm headed.

And speaking of heading somewhere, read on, and let's take a look at who's driving the car. Not just my car—*yours*.

Chapter Three:

The Kid in Pull-Ups

Old Pal, please can I drive?
—Roselle Holt, age 5

Who's Driving?

He was small, gray-haired, rumped, smelled of cigars, and his ties always had little burn holes from dropped ashes. He was my beloved grandfather, Daddy Frank, and he gave me the first unconditional love I ever knew.

He always referred to himself as Your Old Pal and we little gold digger sisters did too. We'd implore sweetly, "Old Pal, *please* can we buy a coloring book *and* paper dolls *and* a nurse kit?" Though he'd laid down the law that we could each choose just one toy at the dime store, we always knew he'd come through. He didn't spoil us—that is, let us run wild or act bratty—but he loved to indulge us, and there's a big difference between the two.

When Old Pal would ceremoniously unwrap one of his Cuban cigars, he'd first slide off the cigar ring and give it to one of us little girls. They were shiny silver and gold,

fancy embossed metallic-looking paper rings with pictures on them, great for being the princess in play-like scenarios. He also used to save his Antonio y Cleopatra Habana wooden cigar boxes for us. A little mother already, I would make mine into doll beds with mattress, pillow, and a handkerchief sheet. My tomboy sister Carolyn turned hers into a repository for her current collections of pods, dead bugs, snail shells, and God knows what. Eew!

My favorite moments with my Old Pal were when he'd put me in his old black car, go to some safe country road, pull me onto his lap, and let me drive. His hands always hovered above the steering wheel that I happily sawed back and forth, and of course his feet controlled our forward motion, but I thought I was driving.

Here's what I'd like to share with you, besides fond memories of a sweet granddaddy. Though the little girl inside needs to come out when it's playtime, your Big Girl personality has to have ultimate control of your life, just as Old Pal was truly in charge of the car.

It's deeply important that you get in touch with the little girl in you, let her play, flirt, and sometimes be just a little naughty, comfort her when she's sad, understand when she's tired and cross.

You can take your baby self for a ride now and then, *but never ever let her drive the car*, whether you're negotiating a settlement or deciding whether or not to call the guy who blew you off. Baby, you need Big Girl Panties for those times.

Trying to Shake Off the Kid

The very first time I discovered my Little Girl was many years ago. For a long time thereafter I would periodically lose and then rediscover her. Now I have my arm around her all the time. But then...

It was summer in Texas, and a dozen of us therapists were attending a psychodrama workshop. In psychodrama, instead of talking about some troubling or unfinished aspect of your life, you act it out, using other workshop participants to play different people in your life or parts of you. There is a skilled director who helps the process, much as in an acting class, with the very big difference that this is not fiction, it is real life concerns of real people. (Yes, therapists have unfinished business, too. That's why we are attracted to helping others with theirs.)

Being a gung-ho kind of person, I dove headlong into the process. When it was my turn, I imagined my father, a most difficult man, sitting in the chair in front of me. I started out mad, railing at him for hurting me, but then I began to plead. "Why don't you accept me the way I am? Why can't you love me instead of tearing me apart with your anger and criticism? I've tried so hard to please you all these years. Please, please love me!"

Then I straightened up and snarled, "I hate that part of me, that mewling little beggar, that weak, whiny, sniveling little baby. I've grown way past her. I'm strong now. I'd like to kill her!"

The director had me choose someone in our group to play that part of me. I picked the weakest-looking person

in the room, a nice little woman who came over to me, sat on the floor, and grabbed onto my right leg like a barnacle.

“Get off! Get *off!*” I was as enraged as I have ever been in my life. I shook my leg hard, but she hung on. I tried to pry her fingers apart, but they were glued together. If there hadn’t been a rule about not hurting each other, I might have clubbed her on the head. I was frantic, desperate to get rid of her.

“Looks like you’re not getting anywhere,” the director said. “Are there other resources here you’d like to use?”

Feverishly I instructed each workshop participant to join a daisy chain of people trying to pull her off. When two or three couldn’t do it, I added another, then another, until the string of pullers snaked out into the hall.

All that pulling and she still would not budge. She was fused to my leg, entwined around it like her life depended on it—which was absolutely true of the Little Girl part she was playing.

I was beside myself (so to speak).

Finally the director said, “I guess you’re going to have to try something else. Look at her.”

I looked down at that little face, those huge green eyes (had I unconsciously chosen her for our matching eye color?), and I was overcome with emotion. I started to bawl and said, “Oh, Honey...” and bent down and brought her into my arms. I rocked her back and forth and kind of moaned, and I swear to you that right now I can hardly see my fingers through the remembering tears.

That’s the moment I recognized my Inner Child, and

when I remember to, I've taken loving care of her ever since. I talk to the insecure little girl in me with loving, soothing tones. I acknowledge and embrace her as best I can.

Years later, I promised I wouldn't get her into any more emotionally abusive relationships. "Sure," she said doubtfully.

"Well, OK, I can't swear I'll never start into one, but the second I realize where I am, I'll grab you up and run like hell."

And I've kept that promise ever since.

Honor Your Canary!

As vulnerable as she is, your Little Kid is also very powerful. She represents not only the joyous, spontaneous part of you, but also your deepest unrequited needs.

Sometimes she is dangerously naive, but other times she has X-ray vision, knows when something isn't right. Does that mean she's smarter than your grown-up self? No, just smart in a different way.

She makes a swell mine canary.

In the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, thousands of men, women, even children died in coal mining accidents, often from dangerous methane or carbon monoxide. To detect those odorless gases, the miners carried caged canaries. Even down in the dark mines, the canaries would usually chirp and trill all day, but if gas levels got dangerously high, they would stop singing, sometimes even keel over and fall off their perches. This was the signal to get the hell out of the mine before it asphyxiated the miners or blew up.

When you get that “something isn’t right” feeling, honor it. It’s your mine canary talking.

What about Cravings?

Unfortunately, sometimes your Little Kid feels so deprived, pleads so eloquently for what she wants or needs, that she is in the driver’s seat. You know what I mean. Almost every dumb (in retrospect) decision you have ever made was prompted by your wheedling or heedless child. You *knew* better, but you led with your feelings instead of your logic and experience. Maybe you mistook recklessness for harmless spontaneity, so you once again allowed yourself to be attracted to a guy who clearly drinks too much, or is seething inside, or is looking for a mommy. Your Kid can be so touchingly eager to be appreciated that you bypass good sense and jump back into a familiar fire.

Claiming the Driver’s Seat

It’s awfully hard to keep your Big Girl derriere firmly in the driver’s seat if you don’t understand the powerful pull of the Little Kid. When she’s running two quarts low on something essential—maybe rest, or excitement, or love—she can be truly compelling.

The next chapter will help you know how you can finally give her what she needs.

Chapter Four:

Rewriting Your Story

Any story worth telling is worth putting
a top hat and cane on.
—Fairy Burch Miller

The Dark Fairy

Once upon a time there was a beautiful kingdom ruled by a benevolent king and his lovely queen. They had everything in life except what they wanted most: a child. They continued to smile upon their people, but their hearts were very sad, and their subjects were sad for them.

After many childless years, they were overjoyed to learn that the queen was expecting a baby. The people of the kingdom were jubilant, for they loved their rulers dearly.

In due time the queen gave birth to a precious baby girl, the most exquisite infant anyone had ever seen. There was celebration throughout the land. People wove flowers into garlands and wound them around poles and danced in circles, while musicians played flutes and drums.

When it came time for the baby's christening, the king

and queen invited all the fairies of the land to be her godmothers, each to give the baby a gift, as was the custom of fairies in those days. The only fairy left uninvited was the Dark Fairy, who tended to be spiteful and was easily riled. Besides, she hadn't left her tower for fifty years, and if she wasn't dead, she was certain to be a cranky guest at the festivities. Best to leave that rock unturned, the king decided.

After the christening ceremony was over, the fairies approached the cradle one by one to deliver their gifts to the baby.

The first fairy said, "This child shall possess a good and kind heart."

The second said, "She shall have intelligence and a love of learning."

The third said, "I give her honesty and good character."

The fourth said, "I bestow the gift of music and dance."

The fifth said, "I give her the greatest beauty and grace."

The sixth said, "She shall have wit and laughter."

And so it went, gifts bestowed by all the fairy godmothers except the smallest one. She was new at the game, a Rookie Fairy, and since she was shy, she hung back in awe and watched as the veteran fairies presented their perfect gifts.

Suddenly, in through an open window flew the Dark Fairy! She cackled like an old crow (which she strongly resembled) and croaked: "So I wasn't good enough to be a godmother to your precious baby! Well, here's what your disrespect has earned you. I give this child the gift of *death*. When she is but sixteen, she will prick her finger upon a spindle and *fall down dead!*" And she flew out the

window, leaving a trail of black smoke.

Everyone was stunned with horror and grief.

Suddenly the little Rookie Fairy came forward and said, “Your Majesties, I do not possess the terrifying powers that the Dark Fairy has. I cannot completely undo her hex, but I can soften it. All your efforts will not prevent the princess from pricking her finger, but she shall not die. She shall fall into a deep sleep lasting a hundred years, and all the people and creatures in the kingdom shall sleep as well. After the hundred years, her True Love will come to find her and kiss her awake, and everyone else shall awaken too, and there will be great joy throughout the land.”

And so it came to pass.

Undoing the Hex

It’s never too late to undo any hurtful black magic from your childhood, to finish growing yourself up. Look around and you’ll find role models for inspiration. Among celebrated people I’d choose Susan Sarandon for her talent, humor, and passion in standing up for the rights of others. I also love what she said about aging: “I look forward to being older, when what you look like becomes less and less an issue and what you *are* is the point.”

(Also, I admit there’s an actress hiding inside me who pops out occasionally, a gleeful Auntie Mame. She has embarrassed me at times, but she has such fun. Besides, she will not be denied.)

Maybe you'd choose someone totally different for inspiration, someone a bit more traditional. We all get to choose what fits for us.

The Growing-Up Family

Maybe as a kid you were required to eat everything on your plate, even if it gagged you. Now that you're a grown-up, you can eat what you want and leave the rest. Same thing with your messages from home.

Everything you learned from your own growing-up family was probably meant to be helpful. Some of it was, and some of it was not. Some of it was so-called teasing, usually beginning with "You're such a . . ." but was actually a prescription for how and who you were expected to be.

I hope you were lucky enough to grow up where everyone respected everyone else, including children, where the caregivers were secure, stable, wise grown-ups, and the atmosphere was safe.

But I doubt it.

For one thing, even if your parents were such paragons—which I also doubt, since they were human—you still had to go to school, and that's a tricky terrain for any kid, especially if you were a little shy, or too smart to be liked, or wore funny clothes, or clompy shoes, or even the wrong color socks.

And especially if you showed how much you yearned to be accepted. Man, that was the kiss of death.

Of course, nobody gets out of this life alive, and that's OK. At least it's universal. What we all aspire to, though, is

to get through it more or less intact. That means we have to rewrite some of the script we created, the map of the world (and ourselves) we drew according to our early learning.

Each of us begins as a tiny child who receives many gifts: skills, talents, messages, advice, demands, instructions, warnings, taboos—all the training and preparation that our caretakers think we need, and some that they give us unknowingly. Unlike the Dark Fairy's gift to Sleeping Beauty, the messages we receive are well intentioned—but some of them contain an element of darkness or limitation.

Maybe you recognize some of these:

- Be careful. Don't take risks.
- Be quiet, people are noticing you.
- Don't get conceited (i.e., don't like yourself very much).
- You made a fool of yourself (us).
- Would you make up your mind?
- Don't talk back (i.e., don't tell your side of the story).

And the darkest of all:

- You don't really feel that way. *We'll* tell you how it's OK to feel.

Remember, those injunctions were usually well intended. Maybe they got handed down, unexplored, from generations before you. When they began they may have been useful, perhaps even crucial to survival, but their form continued long after their function was obsolete.

But now that you aspire to Big Girl Panties, you can bring forth your own good fairy and rewrite whatever mandates are causing you trouble in the present.

Here are some *antidotes*, new self-talk from Big Girl you to Little Kid you:

- What do *you* think, honey?
- Go for it, babe! [Note: How else could I have written this book?]
- Strut your stuff a little. It's OK.
- Of course you can!
- You'll always find a way.
- You are so smart and creative!
- How do you feel, and what do you need right now?
- Does this really fit for you?
- Remember, honey, "No thanks" is a complete sentence.
- You deserve better than that.

I'm not suggesting that you become an insufferable narcissist, thinking no one else is important. But I do urge you to take care of yourself—your needs, self-esteem, and self-respect. Otherwise you'll look to others to fill in your blanks, which keeps you a dependent diaper-wearer.

The Little Painter

I know a family that did a fabulous job of undoing a hex.

They had just transferred into the area and bought a house in the posh part of town, because they'd heard it had the best school system and they valued a good education for their children. (Also, the parents were highly cultured and may have been just the tiniest bit elitist.)

After a couple of weeks of school, one day their youngest came home dejected and quiet, which was not her usual style. They kept asking her what had hap-

pened. Embarrassed and ashamed, she finally told them this story.

During the art period, her teacher had told the class to paint a specific subject: a farm in a rainstorm. The kids painted away, and most of their pictures looked about the same. They had a rectangle of a barn, a few yellow humps for haystacks, curlicues of color for flowers, and some four-legged animals that might have been pigs, goats, or calves. Oh, and some white blobs with forked yellow legs, apparently chickens. Overhead, there were a couple of lightning zigzags, dark scribbles of clouds, short vertical descending lines to indicate rain. The farm scene below was static, as if the animals and chickens were in a different weather zone.

But not Mary Ann. She smooshed her fingers in the paint and conjured up a by-God *storm*. Spirals of blackened green pierced with white streaks, tree-shapes pushed over by ferocious winds, dark yellow crops undulating from the blast. She felt the primal energy of that storm and captured it on paper, like lightning in a bottle.

Then her teacher showed Mary Ann what the other children had painted, and said kindly, “Now honey, do yours over, OK? And this time get it right.”

She didn’t. She just hid her picture in some other papers and brought it home.

Many parents would have taken the line that whatever the teacher said must be right, because she was the authority figure.

Fortunately, her wise mother and dad praised her

interpretation of the storm. “You have a marvelous artistic sense, baby!” they told her. “You looked right *into* that storm. You’re so creative! We’re really proud of you. Trust your own instincts, honey. Every great painter wants to paint from her own interpretation, like you naturally do. Don’t let anybody take it away from you!”

Kids face that sort of conformity pressure every day. Our society promotes rugged individualism in adults (well, sometimes) but often punishes it in children, especially in school.

Maybe you knew somebody like our next kid. Or maybe you were enough like him to relate.

Picking on the Weird Kid

Other kids, not just teachers, can punish differentness. In high school I had a friend who was definitely weird by other kids’ standards. He collected snakes and kept dozens in his basement. He was also fascinated with fish and had several huge saltwater aquariums with unusual specimens. In the basement was a whole wall of scientific books he’d collected as he taught himself everything he could about these creatures. In his backyard was a huge chain-link cage surrounding a tree, a sanctuary for his pet raccoons. He was into habitat building long before zoos were.

He looked like a bigger version of Harry Potter, with huge eyes behind round glasses. “Harry” appeared very solemn, serious, a scientist in the making, with few social skills and zero small talk. He had a fabulous, brilliant sense of humor, but it was a little...well, warped isn’t the

right term, just a little left of center, and almost always went over the other kids' heads in our little town.

Some kids can be the cruelest creatures in the world, and the dumber they are, the meaner they can be. They heaped scorn and back-hand guffaws on Harry. Even his teachers gave him a bad time, except his science teacher, who realized she had a young genius on her hands.

What they didn't know, though I did because I was in on it, was that every few months Harry would take a Greyhound bus from our town in west Texas and go to Dallas. At the aquarium in the Hall of Science, or sometimes at the zoo, he would pretend to be a visiting professor from North Carolina. He was so knowledgeable about fish that the aquarium staff totally bought this seventeen-year-old nerdy kid (who looked thirty) as an ichthyologist, and he was such a snake expert that he passed for a professor of herpetology at the zoo. He'd give informal lectures in front of the exhibits, answer troubling questions, quote from some of the authorities he had studied back home. In his basement. Surrounded by snakes.

When he had to leave, someone would offer to give him a ride to the airport, but he'd say thanks, he already had a ride. And he'd walk out of sight to the nearest city bus stop, take a bus to the Greyhound terminal, and head home.

What a secret! What brass! I was crazy about the guy and felt honored that I was the only one who knew about his, uh, hobby. (He also had a soaring license, a ticket to fly gliders. No other kid knew about that, either. I was a conspirator in his secret passions.)

His parents understood him and gave him all kinds of support: “You’re so smart! You’re gonna be famous some day! Gee, we’re so proud of you!” Because of their backing, he let the school kids’ jibes roll off him. He ended up marrying another scientist who also had a weird and wicked sense of humor and adventure, and they are supremely happy with their work (he is now a PhD professor for real, and so is she) and their small band of like-minded social misfits.

Most often, no one will stand up for the abused target of taunts. Usually even the most tender-hearted onlookers stay quiet, not wanting the meanness to swing around and focus on them. That’s why I cherish this next story.

Respect Is a Two-Way Street

Sally was flying blind when raising her three kids. She didn’t have an ideal model in her history to go by. Even so, she encouraged her children to be their own persons, not clones of others, and to respect other people.

One day her son got sent home from elementary school because he’d sassed his teacher. It seems she had gone around to all the boys whose hair was too long (according to her) and pinned their hair up with bobby pins, telling them that if they wanted to look like little girls, she’d help them. Some of the children laughed uneasily.

Sally’s boy said, “Mrs. Smith, I don’t think it’s fair to humiliate people that way.”

She said, “Young man, I don’t like your attitude!” “Mrs. Smith, I don’t like yours.” Off to the principal’s office, then home.

Sally gave him the kind of spiel my parents would have given me. “You sometimes have to respect the uniform even if you don’t respect the person wearing it.” And the boy answered, “Mom, how can I respect her when she doesn’t respect *anybody*?”

Sally nodded and gave him a hug. She told him it takes guts and character for a little kid to stand up with dignity to an authority figure, in defense of the shamed and defeated.

Mrs. Smith probably didn’t learn anything, but Sally did. She came face-to-face with her son’s personal integrity. I hope Mrs. Smith at least didn’t bully any more kids while that boy was in her class.

We All Need Cheerleaders

These stories have something in common: sympathetic adults who reassured the kids that they were not only OK, but terrific. These children grew up to have a well-defined sense of self that is *inner-referenced*: that is, they can look inside themselves to see if they’re on track, instead of needing other people to validate them.

Maybe you were lucky enough to have a teacher, Scout leader, or Sunday school director who reassured you that you were smart or talented or just simply a swell kid. Mine was Miss Whiteside, a seventh-grade English teacher who wanted me to enter the Interscholastic League Ready Writers essay-writing contest. I was only eleven, two years younger than my classmates, and definitely a nerd. A nerd with buck teeth (later straightened), wild red hair, and freckles.

Many of the other entrants in the contest were much older high schoolers, but that didn't deter Miss Whiteside. She kept giving me extracurricular assignments to write on this subject or that, to strengthen my writing muscles. She prepared me so well that I ended up winning the contest in my school, then got first place in the whole town (including the high school contestants), then won at district, then regional, and finally got creamed at the state finals—which indeed I deserved. (Hey, I was only eleven!) Actually, I wasn't all that good. I think the other kids just weren't encouraged and coached like I was. Miss W. taught me that I could write, that I was a writer, by God! What a wonderful gift to a little preadolescent outsider who had to wear clompy orthopedic shoes and yearned to be accepted by the In Girls but never was.

What about You?

Think back. Who rained on your parade in the past? Told you it couldn't or shouldn't be done? Looked right past you instead of inside? Let you be picked on, or even (heaven forbid) picked on you yourselves? Conscripted you to take care of grown-ups, instead of the other way around?

Well, Babycakes, that was then and this is now. You were new to this life dance, and you needed some help.

Good news is, now you can put on your Big Girl Panties and give it to yourself.

When I see a client making excuses for people who mistreat them, I ask, "Would you allow your little girl to be

treated this way? Would you allow your child to be demeaned or abused?”

Toxic Empathy

I remember a client I'll call Patty, who kept falling for abusive guys and then making excuses for them. They'd had a bad childhood, or no one understood them, or they didn't really mean it and were always sorry later, or they only acted that way when they were drunk (every Saturday night). In short, she was doing what she had seen her mother do all through her childhood.

She would have a terrible time getting herself out of those situations, not so much out of fear of the guys as through her misplaced empathy for them. I call it *Toxic Empathy* and could write a book about it, and maybe I will.

Patty clearly needed a Big Girl Panty-Wearer to protect her from getting abused, but in therapy she just could not find that Little Girl inside to take care of. She understood the concept intellectually (she looked at everything with her left brain, a coping mechanism from long ago), but she couldn't *feel* it. We tried talking, looking at photos, doing family-of-origin work, hypnosis. Nothing was working. She stayed armored and she kept on getting abused.

I finally got her to talk about her young niece. She adored little Beth, took her places, shopped with her, bought her ice cream, had her for sleepovers, played board games for hours, let her stay up late.

A few years previously Patty had taken a shortcut through an alley and was accosted by a would-be rapist.

She got away safely and even now told the story in a detached way, as if she'd heard it somewhere but didn't know the woman involved.

I asked Patty what she would have done if she'd had Beth with her in that alley. "Would you tell her to go do what the man wanted, because he probably had a bad childhood or was lonesome or needed to be loved?"

"Are you out of your *mind*?" she said.

"Would you try to reassure the man? Find out what was troubling him? Just talk reasonably with him to show him the error of his ways?"

"Roz!" She was outraged.

"Well, then, what would you do? Pull out your cell phone and dial 9-1-1?"

"I'd grab Bethy and run, of course, and I wouldn't stop till we were well away. *Then* maybe I'd use the phone or look for a cop, but first I'd make sure that . . ."

Her voice trailed off. She finally got it that she'd been sending the unprotected part of herself into an emotionally dangerous situation, and then telling herself she should feel sorry for the abusers. She was adept at being an advocate for everyone but herself.

That's the moment Patty started to get well, when she finally realized emotionally that she could, and would, undo the hex from her childhood.

Maybe, like Patty, you've been afflicted with Toxic Empathy. Now you can access the grown-up inside who tells you when you're on track and doesn't blame you when you're not, just helps guide you back to where you

need to be. Not a day passes that you won't feel her nudge you, kindly but firmly, or give you an approving nod.

From Training Pants to Big Girl Britches

You can start right now to change some of your obsolete programming, no matter where it came from. Make note of the inner recordings that keep you from being as free and alive as you'd like to be. Carry an index card, jot them down as they quack in your ear, then at night draw a line through each and write an antidote message.

Early conditioning can be changed. It happens every day, often unconsciously. It is hugely powerful to deliberately change your Dark Fairy stuff into encouraging, supportive messages from you to yourself.

Getting Custody of Yourself

I've become a kind of evangelist for getting entrepreneurial about your own happiness. Because I'll tell you something: nobody in this world is as big an expert on you as *you*. Nobody knows as much about what you want, or what's good for you and what isn't.

Taking care of yourself can start with a lot of little things. Doing more of what you really enjoy. Taking time to decompress between all the roles you play.

What are some of the roles you play in your life? Part of self-empowerment is doing what it takes to make the transition between those roles. Otherwise, you're so busy wearing different hats, you lose track of your Self.

Neuroscientists tell us we use only a tenth of our brain's potential, and that's a pity. But it's a downright tragedy that many of us are using only a small portion of our *life force*.

Getting custody of yourself means becoming fully alive and fully responsible, accepting that you may not be able to control the externals, but you are fully in charge of the interior landscape of your mind.

This attitude of life entrepreneurship creates a space for celebrating life as a marvelous and precious gift. When you accept responsibility for being the one who gets yourself into tight places as a result of your choices, conscious or unconscious, you are the one who can either get yourself out or decide how to use the squeeze to make lemonade.

Accepting responsibility for yourself and your own happiness means not being a victim. That kind of personal authenticity also means you won't victimize others. It frees up alternatives and gets those creative juices flowing. Best of all, taking custody of yourself makes life so much more fun.

Affirmation Cookies

Affirmations are messages you send to yourself about what *is*. Some of them are bleak and dark, others are light and bright. You can consciously choose the ones that turn your own light on.

Here's an idea you can use right now. Imagine you are sitting in front of a giant crystal bowl heaped with fortune cookies. Each one contains a message of hope, appreciation, and strength for you.

Make a list of what you'd like those messages to be. Some examples might be:

- I deserve to enjoy my life.
- This is my life to do with as I choose.
- Whatever happens, I can always say, "There is another way of looking at this."
- I choose to take pleasure in each day.
- I choose to stay aware of what I like about myself and others.
- I deserve love, just as I am.
- This is a day to have some fun!

Notice that they are in the present tense, because to your Unconscious, everything is now, whether it happened thirty years or thirty seconds ago.

Kiss Yourself Awake

Remember the Sleeping Beauty who waited a hundred years for her true love's kiss? Well, starting right now you can be your own true love, kiss yourself awake, and speak affirmations of self-love and acceptance.

Your most sacred task as a Big Girl is to take loving care of the Little Girl inside. If you have a photograph of yourself as a child of three to eight years old, put it where you can see it daily.

Imagine that there is a porch swing on which you settle, pulling the child onto your lap or beside you. Inhale the fragrance of her hair, her body warmth and weight. Gently begin to swing, perhaps humming or singing, or telling a story. In a little while, ask her to tell you something that is

true for her. Ask her what is the best thing in her life and what is the worst. Make no judgments about what you hear, just sympathetic understanding.

Promise you will take care of her always, let her be playful and silly sometimes, and tell her every day what a precious, unique, and beloved person she is. Always make sure she is securely and comfortably snuggled into her car seat, and let her know that she doesn't have to know how to drive. She isn't even allowed to. You will make sure it's the Big Girl who makes decisions, navigates, and is always in the driver's seat.

Chapter Five:

Shuck Those Procrastination Panties



My mother always told me I wouldn't amount to anything because I procrastinate. I said: "Just wait!"
—Judy Tenuta, comic

Now that we've decided who's going to be in charge of your life—namely, the grown-up—it's time to check for rips, frays, and raggedies in your Big Girl panty drawer.

Also for bugs.

There are so many ways you can get in your own way, and you've probably tried a lot of them. Fortunately, there are also some terrific remedies.

What's the hardest part about getting started? *Getting started!* And what keeps you from moving forward on the changes you need in your life right now, today? A bug in your system called Procrastination.

Like a bug in your computer, this little dude can bring your best intentions crashing to a dead stop.

Procrastination-Busting

It's perfectly OK with me if you glance through this book and then put it somewhere safe, where you aren't likely to confront it in the near future. Or maybe you just bought it for entertainment value. That's OK too.

On the other hand, if you're ready right now to get some traction, let's go kick ass on procrastination.

In Praise of the Good Kind

I'm not talking about the luxurious procrastination that feels gratifying and slightly subversive. For example, I sort my office mail into three categories: Toss It, Deal With It Now, or Think About It Later (TAIL). I'm careful not to put anything urgent or important onto the TAIL pile. When I finally get around to viewing it days or weeks later, or when it threatens to topple over, that tedious seminar I was ambivalent about attending has already passed, the 25 percent-off sale has expired, and I'm relieved not to have to make a decision. Time made it for me. (Of course, I actually made it myself when I consigned the letter to the TAIL pile in the first place. Not to decide is a decision.)

No, I'd take to the streets in defense of everybody getting to have a TAIL category in life. If it was good enough for Scarlett O'Hara, it's good enough for the rest of us.

The Kind That Undoes Us

It's the *sabotaging* procrastination we're after here, the kind that does you in, deals you out, lets you down, and screws you up.

You know what I'm talking about. *Never put off till tomorrow what you can put off till the day after tomorrow.* Then you feel guilty and defensive, and wring your hands because you still haven't written that thank-you note or short story, stayed on that diet for at least two weeks, or cleaned out that closet since the first Clinton administration.

If you don't deal with it, procrastination is an insidious little varmint that scuttles around the baseboards of life, contaminating your best intentions. The little saboteur loves to perch on top of your to-do list, gloating, knowing full well who's boss.

Infects the Whole System

Procrastination and its evil twin, the clutter-bug, can sabotage a business or a marriage. To counterbalance the procrastinator, your partner may become a control freak, a set-up not conducive to a relaxed, supportive partnership. It's the old game of Enforcer vs. Rebel, and it's a no-win deal for everybody.

As you get ready to proceed down the road of life with your Big Girl Panties on, my job is to help you watch out for potholes, dead ends, and nasty things that scabble around in the night.

For a lot of years I have coached people on how to defeat their own self-defeating behaviors, starting with procrastination. Clients keep asking *why* they sabotage themselves, why they can't seem to follow through. Those with Attention Deficit Disorder at least have a neurological explanation or excuse, but they yearn to change more than anybody.

Here then, gleaned from many years of personal experience as both a professional guide and recovering procrastinator, is my Top Ten list of reasons why people persist in procrastinating. See if you recognize the tone, if not the actual words, of the Self-Talk that perpetuates each one. Identify the ones that fit for you and consider the Antidote Action for each.

As soon as you're ready to rid yourself of that time- and energy-sucking varmint, get out a big heavy shoe, stalk the little sucker, and *stomp it flat!*

Top Ten Ways to Perpetuate Procrastination

1. Paralysis (too many stacks, boxes, albums)

Self-Talk: "I don't know where to start. It's too overwhelming."

Action Antidote: Think small. Pick a very small piece of the overall project to start, and complete it. Then pick another small piece to attack. Give yourself plenty of attagirls! as you go along.

Do remember that not everything has to be gorgeous. With the nice shoebox-size photo boxes available these days, you don't have to spend hours putting all your pictures in albums, unless you're scrapbook-happy. Maybe you'll just stick them in boxes by category or date or trip, and later you can discard duplicates and the ones that make you look like Aunt Edna.

You may recognize this strategy as a variation of the TAIL pile. Recycling ideas is even better than recycling newspapers.

2. Perfectionism (performance anxiety)

Self-Talk: “If I can’t do it right, I won’t do it at all.”

Action Antidote: Face it. You aren’t ever going to be perfect. And who’d like you if you were? Might as well get an A for effort. (You’ve been giving yourself D-minuses anyway. Stop it!)

Take a minute right now to look inside and see whether you have a habit of giving yourself critical grades. Perfectionists are really hard on themselves, and often on others too, which leaves them frequently worried and sometimes avoided by others.

I understand. I really do. You’re just trying to keep the world safe and organized. (Maybe the way your parents did. Or how they didn’t, big-time.)

Unfortunately, your perfectionism can be paralyzing. Begin cutting yourself some slack right now, and get started on whatever you’ve been putting off that will make you feel so-o-o much better when it’s completed.

Take consolation in the graffiti adage painted on a bathroom wall at the Harvard Business School: “Any job not worth doing is not worth doing well.”

3. Poor Procedures (lack of strategies, systems)

Self-Talk: “I don’t know *how* to make it better.”

Action Antidote: Design your own personal to-do list. Estimate the time each task will take, and add a 20 percent fudge factor for unexpected interruptions. Be sure to make room for down-time and recreation.

Now dedicate a specific length of time you’re willing to dedicate to the first step. Twenty minutes is nice. You have now created a system for whittling away at your own personal procrastination pile.

Set a wind-up kitchen timer for twenty minutes and work ceaselessly until it dings. Then you can stop, or not. It’s up to you. You have fulfilled your promise to yourself.

Wasn’t that easy? Now go replicate it tomorrow.

4. Packrat Programs (fear of not having enough)

Self-Talk: “I’ll throw it away as soon as I’m sure I’ll never need it again.”

Action Antidote: Too much clutter can clog your eyeballs and lead to Frozen Brain Syndrome. Pretend you’re moving to Europe. Keep only what you’d pay to ship. Dump the rest. See how much lighter and brighter your surroundings and your brain becomes.

If that technique makes you gulp, pretend you’re just moving across town into a smaller house or office. Or you’ve just died (sorry, we’ll miss you!) and want to set the scene for what your survivors will find. You don’t really

want to be represented by that tatty old terrycloth bathrobe or your naughty stash of erotica. (No, *wait!* Don't throw that out! You aren't finished with it.)

5. Perceptual Problems (*rationalization, denial*)

Self-Talk: "I've got plenty of time. It isn't even due until...[June, next week]."

Action Antidote: No, you don't have plenty of time, not if you're indulging in procrastination. You'll put it off till you really don't have time; that's your habitual operating mode. It has worked since grade school. But one of these days, mark my words, it'll backfire at the very last nanosecond. Murphy's Law says that if anything can go wrong, it will—and you need a cushion of time and a workable plan to allow for old Murphy.

Here's what I recommend instead.

Working backward, create a stair-step chart, with the outcome on the top step and the starting step on the bottom. Add timing to each step. Now start climbing. Have as your goal to finish the project well before it's due.

I'll give you an example of my own idiosyncratic (i.e., weird) process.

Goal: To turn in a term paper.

Step beneath it: Create a polished final draft.

One step down: Write the next-to-last draft.

Next step down: Write a crummy first draft, which you will rewrite later.

Next step down: Do research.

First step: Decide what to write.

So now you have the steps drawn out and up, from start to finish: (1) decide, (2) research, (3) crummy first draft, (4) better draft(s), (5) polished final draft, and (6) turn it in.

If this seems bewildering—as in “Why not start at the beginning in the first place?”—feel free to do it that way. I often do, too. This book, for example, started with the decision to write and proceeded from there.

The working backwards version, however, is helpful (to me, at least) if you have a huge goal, such as becoming a brain surgeon, and you have to research the myriad of steps to arrive at Dr. Specialist, scalpel in hand.

6. Permissiveness (lack of personal discipline)

Self-Talk: “My momma always did this for us kids.”

Action Antidote: Dedicate a period every day to being a grown-up, willing to do what it takes to get what *you* really want. Then choose an item from your list and do it—no ifs, ands, or buts.

Look back at #1 above, which tells how to do this.

Your greatest problem may be that you don’t know how, but it also might be that you grew up under the handicap of a martyr mother who convinced herself it was easier to do the damn thing herself than insist the kid do it. It was no favor to you.

Perhaps go back to Mom and say, “OK. Don’t do it for

me, I need to learn this. How do you put out a terrific brunch so beautifully? Show me, step by step.”

Read on. You may also find yourself in #7.

7. *Peculiar Priorities (avoidance)*

Self-Talk: “I’ll write that letter/chapter just as soon as I practice more guitar chords.”

Action Antidote: Get real! You’re expending more energy on avoiding the task than it would take to do it. Like the commercial says, just *do* it, or at least one important piece of it.

Writers, by the way, have taken this kind of avoidance to an art form. We can find the most incredible ways to avoid writing, even though we love it. It’s nuts.

I used to write at a little A-frame cottage in the woods, and I got a lot accomplished there until I installed a television, and then a phone. Fortunately, the computer in residence there could only be used as a word processor, so I could write, save to a disk, and bring it home to print out and edit. However, if I’d had the Internet to distract myself, I’d probably still be using the disks as coasters.

Now I mostly write at home, where I must avoid being seduced away from the task at hand by cooking, telephoning, Internet surfing, or any number of other avoidances that could easily be put off till I’ve finished a chapter or rewritten a paragraph.

My personal action antidote is the timer method described in #3 above. You do whatever works for you.

8. Petulant Passivity (passive-aggressive resistance)

Self-Talk: “I shouldn’t have to do this. I don’t have to if I don’t want to, and I don’t want to [organize a business, clean out a closet].”

Action Antidote: Stand up straight and remind yourself that you’re not an adolescent any more (are you?).

You may have perfected avoidance as a teenager. How well I remember the dance with my own kids. When I’d finally corner a kid to clean up his or her room, there would be a half-baked effort followed by a disappearing child. I’d end up re-cleaning the room myself while grinding my teeth. I was such a sucker, and I certainly wasn’t doing my kids a favor. Now it’s clear that I should have called them back and made them redo it.

If you realize you’re running this number on yourself, tell the Kid inside to knock it off, get busy, and not be a whiny-pants about it.

9. Personal Put-Downs (guilt-tripping yourself, Poor Me in disguise)

Self-Talk: “I know I keep letting myself (or others) down. I’m just screwed up/lazy/a loser.”

Action Antidote: Consider whether you’re trying to get others to comfort, reassure, or even rescue you by doing it for you. No fair! Start keeping your word to yourself and

others, and you'll get past your feelings of inadequacy and maybe your tendency to be a bit manipulative.

Around my house we have a little game. I try like crazy to get the lid off the jar by myself. I use a rubber gripper. I run hot water over the lid. I bang it lid-down on the counter to help break the suction. But if I just can *not* get it off, I take it to my husband and say in a teeny tiny falsetto voice, "Ooooo!" (sound of futile attempt, accompanied by eyelash batting). And he says in a bass voice, "Why, little girl, let a big strong man do that for you." (It's more fun in real life than it sounds like on paper.) The point is, it's our game, fun and charming. It's not an underground manipulation, which is sad and unattractive. It's one thing to flirt and play helpless, it's another to really *act like and believe* you're an ineffectual baby. In that case, I strongly suggest you either change that perception or get thyself into therapy.

While you're waiting for the shrink's office to call you back, though, go ahead and answer that letter or rearrange that catch-all kitchen drawer. Another practical starting place is to begin to tell yourself some new messages. For example, "I am reliable. I keep my word." "The old me was late, the new is learning to be on time and sometimes even early!"

Then follow through on becoming the new, improved grown-up you, one small change at time.

10. Partner Punishing (see #8)

Self-Talk: "I wish he'd/she'd/they'd get off my back!"

Action Antidote: If you don't value your mate/partner/friend, make a clean break instead of participating in the Death of a Thousand Cuts. That's so tacky. If you do value that person, start demonstrating your appreciation through accountable action. Don't be surprised if your relationship, personal or professional, gets *w-a-y* better.

My goodness, we keep circling back to adolescent rebellion. I'm tired of it, aren't you? It works temporarily to avoid or sabotage your partner, but it keeps you in a zit-faced mindset that wasn't even fun when you were there the first time.

If you have a gripe about your mate, sit down and talk it through, but don't play passive-aggressive games. If your partner is on your back for good reason, respond like an adult. If you are getting criticized habitually, deal with it in a well-thought out conversation. Later in the book I'll tell you how. Meantime, act grown-up. You can always fake it till you make it.

Procrastination Revisited

Maybe I've made a bigger deal out of procrastination than fits for you. We therapists call that projection: I'm projecting my own past hang-ups with procrastination onto you. However, what I've experienced through my years as therapist and life coach tells me that procrastinating is one of the most common cop-outs to avoid wearing Big Girl Panties. Thankfully, it is one of the easiest changes to make, using the Antidote Actions. You'll receive instant rewards and feel more empowered, which is why I've chosen to deal with this little bug first.

If you don't have a problem with it, you probably skimmed this chapter and thought about a procrastinating buddy or partner to pass it along to.

But if that little saboteur is messing you up, I hope you will find these suggestions helpful...just as soon as you get around to implementing them.

It's about Time

Here are some thoughts about time, how to control it and what to spend it on.

Timers

A timer can become your favorite business and personal tool. If you use it purposefully, you'll never resort to the old cop-out, "I got caught on a phone call." Fact is, phone calls don't have the power to "catch" you. You are completely responsible for when, whether, and how long you remain on the line, and that's a powerful truth to know.

At the beginning of the call/meeting/lunch/chat, tell the other person (and yourself), "I'm going to have to go at [a specific time]. Just wanted to tell you now, so we can frontload our agenda" (or whatever jargon you want to use. And you set your timer for five minutes before your specified time. When the timer goes off, you say, "Oops, that's my count-down signal. Let's see if we can summarize (or schedule another meeting) in the five minutes I've got left."

Personally, I use two kinds of timers. Beside my phones I keep a traditional wind-up ticking kitchen timer, and

when that baby goes off, the other person can hear it clearly. When I am out, I carry a little digital timer with a discreet but insistent peep-peep-peep.

Cherish Your Time

Ask yourself, how important is it really that you finish, arrive, accomplish, begin, etc. Maybe it's actually more productive to take a nap or a walk. Time is the coin of life, and it makes sense to spend it where you get the best ROI—return on investment.

“Best” doesn’t necessarily mean “highest profit-making.” When property developers use the phrase “highest and best use” of land, they really mean “biggest money to be made.” But where is it written that a ten-story office building surrounded by concrete is a higher and better use than a park?

You get to decide what is your own personal highest-and-best use of your time. Sometimes it's to follow through with a commitment or earn an honest day's pay. And sometimes it's to swing a child at the playground, or get a facial or massage, or meet your beloved for an impromptu rendezvous.

Chapter Six:

Untwist Your Knickers



Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
—Stephen Covey

Getting Your Knickers in a Twist

Knickers. That's what panties are called in England, and I love it. Sounds like the '60s, with mini-skirts and go-go boots, and three sets of false eyelashes, two on your eyelid and one below the eye. Mod!

My grandmother called them drawers. I had a friend once who called them unmentionables, and hers almost were. My favorite fictional detective, Kinsey Milhone, just calls them her underpants.

Regardless of what you call them, britches do have a way of creeping, and sometimes they can jam you up and give you a wedgie. Even men use the expression, "Hey, don't get your panties in a wad about it."

It simply means, "Calm down, take a deep breath, don't lose your cool. Handle it, whatever it is. Put your Big Girl panties on and *deal* with it."

Sometimes we turn an ordinary event into a catastrophe or we forget to have fun. We dump shoulds and oughts all over ourselves or others, act like the judge and jury, and suck the relaxation out of life. In short, we get our knickers in a twist.

Being a recovering panties-in-a-wad veteran myself, I've had to devise some untwisting techniques. They are embarrassingly simple but so powerful that an international Fortune 500 company brought me to their world headquarters a dozen times to share them with their employees.

Stressbusting

How is stress like the sexual response?

Now that I've got your attention, the answer is: they both originate in the brain. They both are born of *stimulus plus perception*—that is, what happens and how you interpret it.

Let's take a look at stress. Stress is not simply what happens to you. Stress is how you respond or react to the loads you're toting, and that is largely dependent on your thoughts and self-talk.

A huge suspension bridge stands for decades, while millions of cars, pickups, boat trailers, RVs, and even tanks rumble across its strong back. Then an earthquake hits, stress cracks appear in the superstructure of the bridge, and it twists wildly and even collapses in places. The vehicles weren't the stress; they were just stressors the bridge handled daily. The earthquake was the blow that broke the foundation.

You tote a lot of stressors, too. Here are some ways you can keep your superstructure sound so that even unexpected forces don't bring you down.

The Big Deal Scale

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Or if you prefer:

10

9

8

7

6

5

4

3

2

1

Any scale has to be calibrated to be useful. What is a One and what is a Ten? And for that matter, what is a big deal?

A big deal is how big a deal you make out of something. Here is how the scale is calibrated: on a scale of One to Ten, One is nothing. Ten is *Nuclear Holocaust*.

Nothing that happens in life is a One, because you wouldn't ask yourself, "How big a deal is this?" if it's a One. Ones don't even move the needle.

How about a Ten? Well, unless we all go up in flames

together, nothing is ever going to be a Ten.

Actually there are a few other Tens, of course, such as the death of a loved one. But most things we let stress us out are really Threes that we turn into heavyweight Eights by our perception, our self-talk, and the importance we put on them.

Here is the good news: *you* get to decide how big a deal something is to you. That will give you more control over your life than you can imagine. I honestly believe the reason for most people's interpersonal conflicts is a poorly calibrated Big Deal Scale.

Practical Applications

1) You are running a little late to work. The driver ahead of you lollygags along and just oozes through the yellow light, leaving you stuck with the red. You make that an outrage, a *nine*. You are furious. You holler, invoke your trashiest vocabulary, and pound the steering wheel, thereby breaking a nail. Now you are *really* pissed off. Look what that oaf made you do! Your blood pressure rises, your adrenaline glands go into hyperdrive, and you sweat out your best silk blouse. All because that idiot driver has made you *two minutes later* to the office. Unless you try to make up the time by speeding, get pulled over, and...ouch. The Big Deal needle just moved even further.

2) Your beloved forgets it's the day you get your big raise. You bound eagerly into the house, look around for champagne or flowers, and he's stretched out on the sofa sighing about what a bear of a day he had. What an insensitive clod!

This is an *eight!* When he has something to celebrate, you're right there with the fanny pat and big, juicy kiss, and what does he do? He just lies there. Maybe you should call a lawyer.

3) Beloved comes home tomorrow night with an ashen face and shaking hands. "What happened?" you ask with alarm. "They told us today they're downsizing, and I was the last hired so I guess I'll be the first to be laid off." You examine your nails (noticing the one that got broken in traffic and making a mental note to call the manicurist) and reply, "Oh, don't borrow trouble, honey. They know how valuable you are. Are leftovers all right for dinner?" In short, you just disrespected his legitimate Seven by shrugging it off as a Two.

In the first example, the only person you harm is yourself, acting like a maniac over two minutes. In the second and third examples, there's trouble right here in River City because of the disparity between your Big Deal Scale and his.

Many a marriage or family has gotten back on track by paying attention to how the members gauge an event or a situation.

If you want your kids to write their Christmas thank-you notes on December 26 (assuming that's a Five in your value system) and they blow it off as a One, maybe you can compromise. You tell them that writing a note in thanks for a gift is nonnegotiable, unless the giver was present and got thanked on the spot. However, you agree that as long as the notes are in the mail before New Year's Eve, it's all right to skip writing them today. Of course,

you're setting yourself up for their typical-kid avoidance, but you can keep after them a bit.

If your honey makes it plain that he lusts in his heart over the gorgeous next-door neighbor and wants very much to help her wash her car every weekend—an event for which she wears a bikini—you can let him know that's an Eight to you and is not OK.

(Personally, I'd probably let him, because a good guy isn't going to fool around on you, and he's entitled to a little fantasy now and then—but I'm more laid-back than most.)

On a serious note, my best friend has multiple sclerosis and my sister has another kind of auto-immune disease. They both have exactly the same attitude: they are doing everything right to manage their conditions, and then they boogie on. They don't obsess or scramble around the Internet looking for statistics. In short, as my buddy says, "I have MS. It doesn't have me." Those women deliberately pulled an Eight down to a Two. That's not denial, that's courage and common sense. Well, if it is denial, it's healthy denial.

Here's another Big Deal Scale story: At one of my corporate seminars there was a guy named Bill who always made a big deal out of everything. He paced, he worried, he borrowed trouble at the mere whiff of a rumor. His co-workers loved him, but he was a pain in the neck. When I introduced the Big Deal Scale, I said, "If you tend to have big deals all over the place, I suggest you not allow more than one Seven per day. That means if you're backing out of your driveway and a car almost hits you, and you start

toward a number Seven seizure, remind yourself that you might need that Seven later in the day, so you'd better pull this one down a bit."

Bill thought about it for a while, then brightened and said, "Roz, what if you have a day with nothing as high as a Seven?"

"Well, Bill, I'd call that a pretty good day, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah, but I was wondering, if you haven't used your Seven that day..."

And a chorus of his comrades sang out, "No, Bill, they aren't cumulative. You can't save 'em up." Busted! That was exactly where he was going. I guess maybe Bill was primed for a Fourteen day.

Honestly, there are so few things in life that deserve higher than a Five. So you drop an egg on your kitchen floor in the morning. So what? Clean it up and let it go. Maybe your parents want to come for two weeks, and you think one week is way sufficient. Just tell them, nicely, that you want real quality time with them, so you're arranging your schedule around that, but it hasn't got flexibility for two weeks.

Mom: "Oh, that's OK, we won't be any trouble. We'll amuse ourselves."

You say in a calm, pleasant but firm tone, "No, really, Mom, let's have an absolute ball for a week. That's what fits best for me."

If she pouts, realize it's her right to feel what she feels, and you don't have to fix it.

Do not personalize! If you can remember that, you'll be

amazed at how low on the Big Deal Scale most stuff is.

If you have trouble applying this pull-it-down-the-scale advice, think about the environment you grew up in. Was everything catastrophized? Did the family deal in high drama? What was it like to live there?

If you were programmed this way, you may be an adrenaline junkie. Even when you're running on time for an appointment, you somehow manage to find one more thing to do before you leave home, so you end up running late. (Back to the red light encounter.) Your heart pounds and stomach acids squirt.

I encourage you to want excitement in your life. I just suggest that you create some fascinating and healthy ways to get it, other than the high anxiety that Nines and Eights and Sevens produce. It'll help keep your knickers untwisted, I promise.

The Pause Button

The Pause Button is a great preventative for panties-in-a-wad. Sometimes you need to employ it even before you consult your Big Deal Scale.

To install the Pause Button, push the index finger of your right hand into the palm of your left (or vice versa if you're left-handed). Wiggle the finger around a little until you feel a kind of disk. Actually, it's where several tendons come together. If you can't find it, hallucinate it. This is all make-believe anyway.

Do you remember movies in which the action freezes and the hero gets to walk around these unmoving people?

That's how the Pause Button works. When something challenging happens and you unobtrusively push your Pause Button, you create a moment in time and space for yourself. It buys you a bit of breathing room, so you can choose how to respond instead of just reacting.

Choice. That's what it's all about. If the doctor taps you just under the kneecap with his little rubber hammer, your leg will jerk. It's a hardwired *reaction*. On the other hand, *responding* comes from your Big Girl. The Pause Button gives you a chance to say, "That's an interesting idea. Let me think about it and get back to you." Or, "I believe I can do that, but I need to check my calendar to be sure." Or, "Honey, I want a five- minute break here to think about how I want to respond."

See how the Pause Button and the Big Deal Scale can work together? Try it. It's amazing. The combination can unwad your panties in no time.

Slow the Ball Down

I'd hoped by now to have learned who said it, but I haven't. Anyway, some 1940s-era batting whiz was asked by a reporter, "How is it that you have such a high batting average?"

And the baseball player answered, "I slow the ball down."

"No, really," the reporter insisted, "your fans would love to know. How do you do it?"

"I slow the ball down." And his teammate catcher said, "It's true. I've seen it. He slows the ball down."

I've thought a lot about it since I first heard the story, how one man's intense focus can so get him in the zone that his teammate catches and shares the hallucination.

I can picture it. The pitcher nods, winds up, and rockets the ball toward the batter, who slows the ball down by creating a tunnel of perception that contains only the ball and himself. He has a sense of all the time in the world to swing into the exact space where the ball will be, and then—crack!—sends it right out of the park.

Try it. By breathing slowly and deeply, releasing muscle tension and anxiety about outcome, you can move almost in slow motion, gracefully connecting with whatever you have in front of you. You can release your *hurry-up*, that demon of our runaway times, and move or think with ease and graceful elegance. You can respond thoughtfully, rather than react. You will have a choice about where you meet the ball and what direction you want it to go.

As a practice exercise, try talking more s-l-o-w-l-y than you usually do. Notice how happy your mind is to be included, instead of having your mouth blurt out something your thoughtful mind would not have said, or would have said better.

Remember your Pause Button, and use it to. Slow. The. Ball. Down.

Two Dixie Cups and a String

When I was little, we used to get Dixie cups, little paper tubs of ice cream. After we'd finished the contents, my friend and I would wash out the Dixie cups and make walky-talkies.

Any two paper cups will do, even specimen cups from the doctor's office.

We would poke a centered hole in the bottom of each cup and pull the ends of a long string through each, then knot the strings inside so they couldn't pull out of the holes.

Then we'd both back up till the string was tight and begin to talk to each other. The sound waves traveled down the string and vibrated the bottom of each paper cup. You could even whisper and be heard by your friend half a block away.

There were two essential steps to make it work. You had to keep the string (the connection) tight, and you had to take turns being the sender and the receiver. If either kid interrupted the other, it would not work.

Good communication between two people needs to work exactly like two Dixie cups and a string. You take turns, one the speaker, the other the listener. When you're the listener, you don't just impatiently wait your turn for rebuttal while formulating your brilliant comeback, you really listen. Listen for the other guy's *feelings* as well as the content of his message. Listen with your heart as well as your head. Hear that the other person is telling you his truth, which you can acknowledge without having to agree. It just means you listened respectfully and tried to understand where he's coming from.

I truly believe that half the troubles of the world, including our own country, could be repaired if people would just put aside their agendas for a few moments and really seek to understand.

Have fun with your two Dixie cups and a string. If you don't choose to make them, at least pretend to use them when you want real, powerful communication. There's no better knicker-untwister than to hear and be heard.

I'll share some other techniques for communication renovation in Chapter Ten. First, though, let's look at how we receive many of our attitudes, values, and perceptions from the people in our family.

Read on to learn about aunties in your panties.

Chapter Seven:

Aunties in Panties



A Freudian slip is when you say
one thing but mean your mother.
—Author unknown

Growing up I got a whole lot of mixed messages, as did my girlfriends. We had learned from childhood never to act smarter than the boys, even if they had sloping foreheads and knuckles that dragged the ground. In school we were expected to make excellent grades (except in math, where it was more feminine to be prettily confused), be cute as little buttons (but chaste), graduate from college, marry a lad who lived nearby (for the convenience of eventual grandparents), and have the whitest wash on the block. Our kids were to be potty-trained by age two, for no particular reason except that was the norm and a little subterranean competition was always humming away.

My generation of women had been firmly molded to be good mothers, good cooks, terrific entertainers, and a loving support system to the man, the wind beneath his

wings (I *hate* that stupid song). For most, homemaking was their gift and their art, and they contributed beauty and a certain serenity to the world. But I was not one of them, no matter how hard I tried. Even as I made Yeast-Riz rolls for dinner parties, my heart was heavy.

Finally I got a little job that got me out of the house and into the business world I'd never seen, having been catapulted from college to campus work to motherhood, without passing Go or gleaning any wisdom.

My kids were fine. They were met at the door by Grace, the widow who welcomed them after school and kept house for us. Grace looked after them, watched *As the World Turns*, baked cookies, prepared dinner, and went home. She clucked over them a bit excessively, but finally eased off when I told her to let them climb the tree in the front yard, they'd been doing it since they were tiny, and I'd rather risk a kid with a broken arm than one who is taught to fear that which he'd already conquered.

I'd been a secretary before the kids came, helping put my husband through school. I thought secretarial work was the only kind of job available to an English major. Eventually, though, I had a motley collection of interesting jobs, from teaching at a modeling school, to editing a TV promotion magazine, to doing PR for a new hotel, to writing advertising copy and becoming an account executive for an extremely small agency. That was fun. I got taken to fancy lunches by salesmen who erroneously believed that sucking up to the account executive would get us to buy time on their radio or TV shows. It didn't, but I adored being

the schmoozee for a change, instead of the schmoozer.

Eventually I went to graduate school with the intention of taking just one little course, but fell so in love with the curriculum that I took a full load and emerged with a Master's degree. After teaching at several colleges, I became a counselor and started writing again, this time for myself.

It wasn't easy to break out of the mold. In my family, traditional roles were set in concrete. However resourceful they were, my southern lady relatives certainly didn't appear to be models of risk-taking.

But I have been rethinking it, and I've come to some new conclusions. I had a memorable mother, two eccentric grandmothers, one genuine aunt and one by marriage, and a slew of family friends we called "Aunt So-and-So." It took a lot of women to help me grow up.

How were they my models for what a woman is supposed to be? Were some of them examples of what I wanted to avoid? Did some of their peculiar traits trail after me like toilet paper stuck on my shoe? You know, the kind of thing you don't notice till it becomes an embarrassment, but other people do.

As you meet them, perhaps they will remind you of women from your past, ladies who may have passed almost unnoticed at the time but left the scent of lavender or firecrackers in their wake.

Aunt Bea

Aunt Bea is engraved on my memory for three features. One, she was a very good violin teacher and played at my

(first) wedding. Two, she was an amazing cook. Three, like the mommas in *The Godfather*, she served but did not eat with us. This is not because she was submissive. Bea was as far from submissive as you could get. Actually, she was a control freak.

Aunt Bea and Uncle Gus lived in a 1910 Craftsman-type bungalow with very high ceilings and big rooms that were always chilly. Their only sources of heat were ominous red-hot space heaters that would singe your socks if you got too close but didn't banish the ghostly cold spots elsewhere. Since heat rises, I assume that fourteen feet above heads, the ceilings were toasty.

Aunt Bea's kitchen was enormous, with long tin-topped counters and two old-timey refrigerators, each with a round compressor on top like the radial engine on a biplane. Aunt Bea would cook huge meals, serve, replenish, repour, bring hot biscuits or rolls, clear afterward, and serve incredible pastries and coffee, but never sit down at the table. She bustled back and forth from kitchen to dining table like *Star Wars*' R2D2, which she resembled, come to think of it.

It's not that she was antisocial or thought a woman's place was in the kitchen. It's just that she had shopped, scrubbed, lopped, chopped, minced, sauteed, roasted, whipped, baked, and assembled, and she wanted to be very sure that everything was done the way she wanted it done—and served hot.

I'm no great shakes as a cook. I want the table to look nice more than I want the food to be scrumptious. I don't

micromanage as a housekeeper—many weekends the bed goes unmade because I plop back on it several times a day to read, watch TV, nap, or frolic with my Honey.

So, what influence did Aunt Bea have on me? You got it! I like to do things my way on my own home territory. If I'm thwarted I won't start a war, but I don't mind the occasional friendly skirmish.

Big Girl Panties Moral: Aunt Bea set the example of arranging your life, or at least a particular slice of it, the way that works best for you. If your task is to nourish others, fine—just let them know what your style is, and work it out in a way that fits for everybody.

Aunt Gin

Aunt Gin was the polar opposite of Aunt Bea. Far from being determined to do it her way, she wavered like a reed in the slightest breeze.

She was my dad's older sister, Virginia. Their vain, spiteful mother never liked Pop and bedeviled him his whole life, but she took Aunt Gin on as her personal project from birth. Dressed her up, told her what to think (but apparently not how), treated her like a doll, and sucked the life right out of her. Virginia was completely her mother's creature.

Aunt Gin was a child who never grew up. I don't mean she occasionally acted childish, the way most of us do now and then. I mean, she stayed in child mode every moment of her life, as nearly as I can tell. She always spoke in this

little bitty squeaky voice. She had pet names for her children that she still called them when they were well grown: Junior was Juney-Wooney. Bill was Billy-Boy-Boy, and Mary Jane was Macey-Janey, even after she had a PhD. Run that little movie in your mind: an allegedly grown woman calling her adult daughter *Macey-Janey-Waney* in a creepy little high-pitched whiny baby voice. She sounded kind of like the squeal you make when you stretch a filled balloon's neck till it can only emit a tiny falsetto ee-ee-ee-ee-ee. Even as a child I sometimes wanted to smack her.

Let me tell you the extent of Aunt Gin's emotional incarceration to her mother. When the old girl was in her eighties and Aunt Gin in her sixties, she would still whine, "M-o-o-t-h-e-r, I just can't do anything right for you!" You had to have been there to get the full impact of that whimper.

So what in the world did I get worth keeping from Aunt Gin? Answer: She was Hermione the Horrible Example, that's what. She taught me the horrors of never being able to escape your Little Girl Britches.

Big Girl Panties Moral: The whole point of creating your own personal panty drawer is the ability to choose which britches to wear. Aunt Gin was so damaged that she eventually had no choice—she was forever in a loop of pleading and pleasing. (She also got a lot of mileage out of her flap-handed incompetence; other people would do things for her.)

Maybe I'm wrong. It is possible that she was a confident leader at her Sunday School class. But every time I saw her it was in a family setting, where she dithered, deferred, or disappeared.

On days when you're feeling crabby and cross, just the least bit babyish, at least have the good grace to be out front with it. Just explain that you're best left alone for a little while till your fretful mood passes. Give fair warning, straight from Bette Davis in *All about Eve*. Fasten your seat belt, Honey, it's gonna be a bumpy ride.

God forbid you should ever act like a whiny-britches. Bitchy-britches on rare occasions, but not whiny. Please.

Aunt Bill

She was Billie, the wife of my mother's oldest brother, John Lee. He was the no-count brother, as opposed to Raymond, who was simply the ne'er-do-well brother. John Lee was a drunkard and, it is rumored, a doper—although booze was quite enough of a problem.

John Lee finally got so bad that Aunt Bill divorced him. Woooo! A divorce was a very big deal in those days, but Billie held her head up and made it by clerking at the five-and-dime, with some financial help from her former in-laws, Old Pal and Fairy. She and her daughter Betty lived in a darling shabby house down by the river, with big, old trees and a tire swing. My sister and I used to play with her when we'd come to town.

Aunt Bill came from resilient country folks. She seemed to have a strong center and wore the fact that she was

(gasp) a divorced woman, a “grass widow,” with good humor and dignity. She held her head high and kept truckin’ along.

Wherever she was, she made that place just fine. She reminds me of the old poster, “Bloom where you are planted.”

Big Girl Panties Moral: Billie excelled at the gift of making lemonade from life’s lemons—and let me tell you, Uncle John Lee was a lemon extraordinaire. I’d tell you about him and his second wife, Argyll (or was she his third?), but it’s too depressing.

I guess Billie is more of an inspiration now than when I was a kid. In those days Aunt Bill was just Betty’s mother, a lot of fun and wonderfully down-to-earth. Those are traits I value highly.

If you look around and back a generation or so, I bet you’ll find someone like Aunt Bill on your family tree. If so, take heart from her courage and dignity. She probably had the great ability to know which things were big deals and which ones weren’t.

Happy Ending Story: My cousin Betty, Billie’s daughter, married her handsome sailor sweetheart Raymond. (Not to be confused with ne’er-do-well Uncle Raymond.)

Betty’s Raymond had always had an unfulfilled longing to own a little spread somewhere, just a few acres, and raise cattle. But the birth of children and dearth of money prevented that dream—so Raymond, who loved West

Texas sunshine and wide open spaces, took a job in a jewelry store to support his family.

For thirty years he sat at a bench in a windowless room, repairing jewelry.

Eventually he and Betty, who also always worked outside the home, scraped together enough savings to get some acreage on some of the scrubbiest, homeliest land around, outside a tiny town fifty miles away. It had a small house, though, and it was out in the country they loved.

Every day they commuted fifty miles each way to their jobs. It wasn't easy, but Raymond got to expand his vision every afternoon when he left that jewelry store's windowless back room, bound for home.

A few years later a fellow stopped by their house one weekend and asked if his oil company could drill on their land. There was always the chance a well might come in. They agreed. Why not?

And the wells did come in, not just one, but several. Their mineral rights have enabled Betty and Raymond to live comfortably in the autumn of their lives.

They built a new house right in front of the old one and sat on the old porch, watching the new one take shape.

When I heard this story, I fantasized a gigantic house, something right out of the movie *Giant*. Then I visited them and found they'd built a comfortable, pretty, one-story home, with lovely quilts near and on the double bed where they sleep together to this day.

As I flop and sigh, getting comfortable in our king-size bed, sometimes I think of elderly Betty and Raymond

spooning together, snug in their house out there in wide open, magical West Texas.

A few miles away, out of sight and sound, the pump jacks bob up and down like prehistoric black birds, bringing up the oil that enables Betty and Raymond to sleep sweetly, not having to worry about money ever again.

My Fancy-Pants Grandmother

All my permission for flamboyance and theatrics I got from Fairy. Like *Auntie Mame*, she believed life was a banquet, and she wasn't about to miss a single dish. I once thought of writing a book called *Razzle Dazzle Grandmothers* featuring you-know-who in the title role.

Fairy was born on a Louisiana farm (of course, she always referred to it as The Plantation) sometime after the Civil War. No one ever knew just when, because Fairy used to say a woman who'd tell her age would tell anything.

She was born Anna Lucretia Burch and mostly raised by her grandmother, who called the baby her little Fairy.

When the circuit-riding preacher came through to baptize the children who'd arrived since his last visit, her grandmother patted the three-year-old, gave her a push forward and told her to remember that her name was Anna Lucretia (a name the child had never liked). Instead, she loudly announced to the preacher that her name was Fairy, and he named her that before anyone could register disapproval and stop him. My sister has always thought of her as the Child Who Named Herself.

Exit Anna Lucretia. Enter Fairy, the spoiled, selfish, charming, dramatic darling of the plantation, a true Scarlett O'Hara.

Fairy grew up and married Jim Hollingsworth, who was far too good for her according to the Hollingsworths. A few years later they moved to San Angelo, Texas, for the dry air. Jim was ill with tuberculosis.

Three years later, Fairy was a widow with three children to support and no marketable skill except a fine hand at needlework. She decided to be a seamstress, but not to sew clothes—she was too grandiose for that. She would make fabulous hats! She would open Mrs. Hollingsworth's Millinery Shop.

The trouble was, hat shops generally bloomed, faded, and died without notice. Fairy decided she needed to get some *attention*.

She rented a shop, made dozens of elegant hats including one very special one, and covered the shop window with a sign saying:

Come to the Grand Opening of
Mrs. Hollingsworth's Millinery Shop
Come see the hat worth
A HUNDRED DOLLARS!

It raised quite a ruckus. A hat worth a hundred dollars in 1909? Ridiculous. Impossible.

But the curious attended the opening in droves and bought every hat she had. All except the one in the window.

Everyone agreed it was indisputably worth a hundred dollars. Newspapers from all around wrote the story, and Mrs. Hollingsworth's Millinery Shop was a success.

Fairy had stayed up late every night for a week, making her promotional hundred-dollar hat. She covered it with a hundred green rosebuds, each carefully rolled from a one-dollar bill.

Now, I can't confirm the accuracy of that story, but I think it really happened. Three generations of Fairy's descendants have been influenced by the legend of her courage and creativity.

When times get really tough for me, I imagine a big Edwardian hat with draped peach velvet on the underside, covered on top with all those green rosebuds. In my imagination I slowly take it out of its box and put it on my head with a huge hatpin, and I feel—invincible.

The Raymond Shrine

We little sisters loved visiting Fairy. She had been an indifferent mother but was a hoot of a grandmother, highly entertaining.

Her favorite child, Raymond, was killed in a car crash when he was in his early thirties. Fairy never got over it, and her grief was genuine but *so* melodramatic. Ever the ham actress, Fairy staged a mini-wake for Raymond every afternoon when we were visiting. She would arrange herself on her chaise lounge covered with peach silk and laces, beneath a wall-hung what-not that served as the Raymond shrine. Its three shelves held his golf trophies

and a photograph of him in his golf knickers, holding a putter. Fairy would press the back of one hand to her forehead and weep into a lace hankie, while my sister and I sat on the floor, entranced. Then, after a while, we'd all go downstairs and have a snack.

Fairy was socially fearless, and that supreme self-confidence let her get away with behavior that would have been disgraceful in other women.

I have memories. Fairy stompin' out dance rhythms like a turn-of-the-century street minstrel, wailing away on her harmonica as she played "Oh, Them Golden Slippers." Still a country girl at heart, regardless of her airs.

Fairy coming down the grand staircase to greet her guests, slipping, flailing arms wildly, skittering down six steps, miraculously regaining her balance on the bottom stair, and floating graciously toward her horrified onlookers. "Fairy! Are you all right?"

"Of course," she said. "I always come downstairs like that."

Big Girl Panties Moral: What was the gift from this narcissistic, flamboyant, dramatic, brave, talented grandmother?

- Whatever appears on the banquet of life, choose and enjoy what you want, and learn to deal with what you don't.
- If you don't have what it takes to get into their game, whoever they might be, start your own game.
- Whatever you do, have fun! Do it with flair and courage.

I have inherited Fairy's flamboyance, but I also listen with my heart to what other people are saying or feeling.

(She didn't.) I love to put on a show, but I'm willing to back off the stage when it's someone else's turn. (She wasn't.) She loved to be spoiled and indulged, and acted really bratty at times. (I don't. Well, not any more. Well, hardly ever.)

Aunties in *Your* Panties

If you know exactly which aunties, parents, cousins, grandmothers, neighbors, kitchen nannies left a strong influence on you, record it for yourself now while it's on your mind. Write down what the gifts were, what you declined, what unwanted part you inherited but overcame, which bits you're still working on.

Also, if there are still old people around who remember way back when—hurry!—and get them to tell you stories of the old days. If they are shy, you can say you want your own now-or-someday children to know about the family. Videotape if they aren't too intimidated by a mini-cam, or at least turn on an audiotape recorder. They'll probably be surprised and touched that you give a damn about what happened fifty or eighty years ago.

Ask them if they carried their lunch to school and how. In a brown bag? A lunch box or bucket? Tied in a bandanna? What games did they play? What scared them? What kind of school shoes did they wear? Did they have other shoes for Sunday and play?

One of my friends had just one pair of shoes in grade school, all her single mother could afford. One day the heel came off, and the little girl was late to school because of the trip to the shoe repair shop. She still remembers her

teacher asking loudly, “You only have one pair? Couldn’t you wear your Sunday shoes? You don’t have Sunday shoes? You poor thing!” My friend stood there, red-faced with shame and anger. Today she is a highly successful businesswoman who put herself through college. She’s one of the funniest and most brilliant people I know. Maybe that insensitive teacher helped strengthen her backbone.

You sprang from a rich heritage. Maybe forebears who rode buckboards to cross the Great Plains, half-starved but determined not to eat the seed corn that would bring a crop when they finally found a place to homestead. Or immigrants who landed at Ellis Island with two dollars, no English, and only the name of a distant relative who might or might not even still be alive. Or a great-great-grandpa who lost everything in the stock market crash of ’29, and how the family managed for the next thirteen years. Or a great-great-aunt like mine, who fell madly in love with a gambler in a buggy pulled by high-stepping, matched black horses. He later abandoned her and their little girl, but at least she had a couple of wild, memorable years in an otherwise bland, small-town life.

In my counseling office I have a flip-chart on which I draw the stories my clients tell me about their families. It looks like an interlocking map of squares and circles indicating male and female family members, with short-phrase descriptions of the past that serve as markers to return to and explore. There is so much power and poignancy in those phrases.

I celebrate you and all who came before you.

Go to the attic of your memories. Imagine the females who most influenced you. Then pick and choose from what they have to offer: a bit of lace from an ultra-feminine aunt, a flour sack dish cloth from a grandmother who made do through the Depression, a soft swatch of silk from a sexy big sister. What an interesting patchwork of panties we've all inherited from those women who came before us.

You get to choose which ones to consciously weave into your Big Girl Panties today. The rest you can discard without guilt. If they don't fit, honey, don't wear 'em!

Chapter Eight:

The Penny Stretch

Please remember that your
difficulties do not define you; they simply
strengthen your ability to overcome.

—Maya Angelou

Ethel's Journey

There was once a gorgeous, black-haired, blue-eyed little girl named Ethel. Her baby pictures look like a little Elizabeth Taylor.

In the first few years of her life Ethel had some tough breaks. First her daddy died, and Ethel didn't get much attention from her mother with all the turmoil, fear, and grief attendant to his long illness.

Then Ethel came down with polio. People born after the polio vaccine was perfected may not realize how devastating polio was. Until the mid-twentieth century, infantile paralysis left thousands of kids crippled, some forever encased in an iron lung that breathed for their paralyzed lungs, and some who didn't make it at all.

There little Ethel lay, half paralyzed with polio, and she heard the doctor tell her mother, “Now, don’t get your hopes up. This child will never walk. Maybe someday she’ll be able to sit up in a wheelchair.”

Ethel was a very compliant child, not at all rebellious, but this time she said to herself fiercely, “I will too walk! I’ll *dance!*” Such Big Girl resolve in a four-year-old child.

Shortly thereafter her mother married her stepfather, who adored Ethel and was determined to get her well. He discovered a new device that sent electric current into paralyzed muscles, making them contract and stay alive and supple until the nerves regenerated, if they were ever going to. Every day he’d put the electrodes on her little leg, turn on the current, and say, “Now Baby, if you can feel anything, squeeze my neck.” The leg muscles would jump, but Ethel couldn’t feel anything. Then one day, months later, she squeezed. Her comeback had begun.

After many operations and bullheaded determination, at age nineteen she won a Charleston dance contest.

Baby Girl

Ethel married at twenty, and at twenty-four gave birth to her first child. The nurses kept making excuses not to bring the baby to her, until she pitched a hissy-fit to see her baby *now*.

Like all mothers, she unwrapped the blanket to count fingers and toes, and discovered that her baby girl had a twisted leg and a clubfoot. The heel pointed forward, the toes were flapped up in back, and the leg was s-shaped.

Ethel said, “Is *that* all! You had me worried that there was something really *wrong* with her. She will be fine. We’ll just take her to the doctor who helped me walk again.”

She was right. Through a series of casts and braces, the doctor cranked the soft baby bones around till the leg was straight, and the child was walking shortly after her first birthday.

However, the doctors warned Ethel that because the defective leg was shorter than the other, the little girl had to learn to keep her spine straight. Every day Ethel made her do floor exercises to straighten and lengthen her spine, and I mean *daily* except on Christmas. Ethel was adamant. If the kid had a cold, she kept on her flannel pajamas and still had to hit that floor.

The last exercise was designed to straighten the spine by stretching it. The little girl would lie face-down in a diving position, arms stretched out to reach a penny that Ethel put on the floor just out of reach. Ethel held her ankles and said, “Stretch for it, honey! You can make it.”

The child stretched and stretched till she got the penny. It was a long time ago, and a penny looked big to a child.

She thought the reward was the penny, but Ethel knew it was the stretching.

A Penny Earned

Till the day she died, Ethel cherished the memory of her stepfather putting the electrodes of that magic electricity machine on her legs every day and saying, “Put your arms around your Old Pal’s neck, Baby, and squeeze if you can

feel anything.” She knew he was directly responsible for her recovery from polio, and she passed the legacy of recovery along to her daughter.

Sometimes now, when I look at a penny, I remember all those years ago when I lay on the floor and did my exercises, my mother Ethel not cutting me a bit of slack. “What is, is,” she’d say. “We’ll get there, honey.”

And we did. Today I walk straight and tall, thanks to my mother, who taught me the value of stretching a little farther than you think you can.

Panties in a Wad? Not You!

With that kind of legacy, it doesn’t make much sense to get bent out of shape by everyday annoyances. But you know what? *You too* have a legacy of someone in your past who persevered above and beyond a bad hand that fate dealt them. Talk to your relatives. Find out about their stories. Learn how they came to be able to give you what you have today.

We all come from a heritage rich in lessons learned. No one had an ideal role model, but there is something to be said for whatever got passed down to you. There is even benefit in having a Herman (or Hermione) the Horrible Example, whose memory helps instruct you in what *not* to do.

Memorabilia

While there are still family members around who can identify the people in old photographs, get them labeled, and hear the stories.

More importantly, gather photos of yourself as a little kid—school pictures, birthday parties, holiday mornings, your first bicycle, kite flying, all the little *yous* you can find. Look into that young face, see how it changes through the years. Maybe the body language, or the eyes, reveal more of your childhood than you'd ever seen.

Any time the Little Kid part of you is squirming, reassure her that you will handle whatever the problem is. She is eternally five, or six, or nine, or twelve. It's scary to be small and powerless and not know what to do.

Just let her know she can relax, because you're a Big Girl, and you will bail y'all out somehow. After all, you always have. Your solutions aren't always elegant, but they've worked—and with your Big Girl Panties on, they'll just keep getting better.

Chapter Nine:

Who Gets Past Your Gatekeeper?



Sign: Nobody Gets in to See the Wizard.
NOT NOBODY, NOT NOHOW
—The Wizard of Oz

Running Your Fences

We are now going to run your fences, a cowhand expression meaning check to see that the vulnerable lambs, calves, and colts can't get out and the predators can't get in.

You need boundaries to keep your vulnerable self safe, and that means you gotta wear Big Girl Panties a lot of the time, or you're going to get hornswoggled (jerked around or sucked in) by unsafe situations or players. If you've been around a while, you probably know exactly what I mean.

Boundaries are protective limits you set on yourself or others. If you ask people not to smoke in your car or home, you are taking care of yourself. You needn't be rude, just cheerfully state what you're available for and what you aren't.

The price you pay for *not* taking care of yourself with boundaries can be martyrdom and a low-grade depression or anxiety just beneath the surface of your awareness, fogging you up and sucking your life energy.

When you were little, your caretakers made sure you didn't chase the ball into the street, or get in the car with strangers, or open the front door without knowing who was there. Now that you're grown, do you take the same loving, protective care of yourself? It's easy not to, especially since you were also taught to be kind, helpful, and maybe even that sappy watchword of Southern girlhood, *sweet*.

Maybe you need some antidote messages to neutralize sappy sweetness, so here goes:

- *You* are the only person entitled to let people in—to your house, your heart, your head, or your bed. (More about that in Chapter Ten.)
- *You* are the one who can protect the Nice Little Girl inside you from intrusive and unhealthy demands, requests, phone calls, Internet, TV, visitors.
- *You* are the woman who can learn to say “no thanks” without feeling guilty. You'll be surprised at how easy it gets and how calmly most people take it.
- *You* can protect yourself from undue stress, which shortens your life and adds frown lines.
- *You* can decline an order to leap tall buildings in a single bound, even if you think you could. (You can't, but hey, we're all entitled to our fantasies.)
- *You* can identify the price of admission to a relationship,

job, anything—and then decide whether the show is worth the ticket. Everything has a price of admission, honey. Be careful to get your money's worth.

- *You* can learn how to build boundaries, like the cow-hand builds fences.
- *You* can learn to listen to that little voice inside that says, “This doesn’t fit for me. This hurts.”

About Codependence

When I was newly divorced and a newbie counselor, I had a woman client I really liked but couldn’t seem to help. We had a great relationship; it was the counseling that wasn’t working. She finally said so and I agreed, and we parted amicably, though I felt really bad at having been so ineffectual. A few months later she called and said, “Roz! I found out what my problem is. I’m codependent!”

I had to ask, “What’s codependent?” That’s how new the concept was back then. I started learning about it, being particularly motivated when I realized I was codependent too.

Codependence means we are depending on something outside of ourselves to provide our sense of wellbeing and are not being true to ourselves and our own feelings. As long as we keep believing that we can make someone else happy or that someone else has the power to make us happy, we are setting ourselves up for frustration, failure, and possibly victimization.

The codependent woman “understands” despite feeling hurt or frustrated. She may tell herself that oceans of love and compassion will change her emotionally abusive

partner or parent. She does not inspire respect because she doesn't respect herself. She doesn't get it *that it is not* OK to put up with abusive, dismissive, or demeaning behavior from others, no matter what. It's also not OK to mother or "helpfully" control other grown-ups.

The best definition I've found online says:

co.de.pen.dence n. (1) a tendency to place the needs and wants of others first or to the exclusion of acknowledging one's own; (2) continued investment of self-esteem in trying to control both oneself and others [i.e., over-mothering]; (3) excessive worry about how others may respond to one's feelings; (4) self-esteem dependent on approval by others.

Early on, the information about codependence came from alcoholic families, but it was soon learned that any kind of dysfunctional childhood could cause it, especially where there was excessive secrecy, rigid control, shame, or suppression of feelings.

How It Works

My mother was a beautiful girl of nineteen when she met my father. He offered to drive her to Dallas to get the last cast taken off her polio leg, and by the end of that seven-hour drive she was in love. Knowing her, I think she'd

have married him even if she had known what a bumpy fifty-four years were ahead of her. Whatever problems they had, she usually stayed optimistic and always loving. She was, as they say, the Queen of Denial.

Pop was an alcoholic, Ess (her nickname) an enabler. Those labels may not mean anything to you if you didn't grow up that way, but another way of saying it is that they both had their Little Kid Britches on most of the time. He was wracked with self-loathing yet consumed with entitlement, and she had the self-chosen role of calming the troubled waters and trying to make him happy. She could see the decent, yearning man deep inside him, and she spent most of her life trying to help that part of him emerge. She was in her seventies before she finally *got it* that he would forever blame others, be volatile, and sometimes mean. She told me in a wondering, almost disbelieving voice, "I finally realized that John didn't love me. You don't treat people you love that way." That's when she finally began to live for herself.

It is said that Michelangelo went to the marble quarry at Carrara and climbed around and over dozens of blocks of marble until he found the one he believed had the David statue inside. He had it delivered to his studio, then spent long, backbreaking effort to chip away what wasn't David till he released what was.

In his notebook, Michelangelo wrote:

The sculptor in creating his work does so by the strength of his arm, by which he consumes the marble

or other obdurate material in which his subject is enclosed: and this is...often accompanied by great sweat which mixes with the marble dust and forms a kind of mud daubed all over his face.

In short, liberating the gorgeous David took a lot out of Michelangelo, but through enormous physical effort as well as genius, he finally accomplished it.

However, in real life, freeing a wounded beloved from his own prison is impossible. No amount of effort or skill can make it happen. You can encourage and love, but you cannot remove the “obdurate material.” Only the prisoner can.

My mother had to figure that out for herself, as I did in my first marriage. She was in her seventies when she finally got it. I was in my forties when I did.

But here's the thing. Both my father and mother were doing the best they knew how. They stayed together out of mutual need. That's why such a relationship is called codependent. He was emotionally dependent on her, and she was dependent on his dependence.

If they had both committed to counseling and recovery from alcoholism, their life trajectories and those of their children might have been different. They didn't, and what is is.

Object Lesson

That was then and this is now. I still make mistakes, but I will never again make the big one—trying to rescue someone from himself. Can't be done, and besides, it's not

my job, not even as a therapist. I may hold the lantern, but they have to do the work.

You've probably already discovered that life hands out a big load of lessons to be learned. Sometimes you have to do your homework over and over till you carve away the "obdurate material"—the stony cocoon—by which you have kept yourself in the dark.

No one can do it for you. They can only help. Actually, that is the good news. You get to do the work, discover the a-ha's and reap the joy as you make better and better choices that take care of both your grown-up self and the Little Girl Panty Wearer inside.

Frantic Fixers

I have observed that the way little girls are raised can often *program* us to grow up as pleasers, rescuers, or excessive motherers. Maybe you were taught to take responsibility for other people's feelings, to make the adults happy by being perfect, always looking good, and acting right (whatever that means).

Even traditional fairy tales can brainwash us to be helpless victims (chained to a tree as a dragon's dinner) or frantic rescuers.

When I was a child my favorite fairy story was about Elise and her eleven brothers. Their wicked-witch step-mother (yeah, I know, yet another wicked-witch step-mother—how come there are never wicked-sorcerer *stepfathers*?) finds the boys and casts a curse, turning them into swans. Only Elise can save them! She has to

venture out into the world, find her brothers, then break their curse.

She eventually tracks her brothers down, but to break the spell she must weave long-sleeved shirts out of stinging nettles for each of the eleven lads, and she must not utter a single word until the task is done.

So she weaves away with blistered, bloody fingers.

Along comes a king and falls in love with this mysterious maiden. (What was *his* problem?) But a nosy duke spots her looking for nettles in a graveyard, falsely accuses her of being a witch, and sees to it that she is sentenced to death.

Even in prison, she desperately weaves away. She weaves as they come with the cart to haul her to be burned at the stake. She brings the shirts with her, still weaving frantically to finish the final one. At the last minute, the swans fly down and perch on the edge of the cart, and Elise pops a shirt over each. Unfortunately, one shirt is missing a sleeve, so her youngest brother (now a grown man) still has a wing for an arm. At last Elise can speak her innocence. The king gathers her into his arms, and presumably they all live happily ever after, with the possible exception of the one-winged brother.

Let me say again: it was one of my favorite stories, this blueprint for codependence. So brave, so touching! And my second favorite was about the Ice Queen who bewitched little boy Kay and took him to live in her icy kingdom, and only his friend Gerda could save him. Which she did, after many tribulations.

Great Scott! Talk about getting programmed! I admire

Marlo Thomas's terrific book *Free to Be You and Me*, which changed folk tale outcomes to show young women as heroines of resourceful strength, not passive victims or self-sacrificing martyrs.

Crisis Junkies

Like unto the Frantic Fixer is the Crisis Junkie, following an insidious script in which you manufacture catastrophe to prove to yourself or others that *you can be counted on in a crisis!*

On purpose? Of course not. You aren't crazy, just programmed to save the day, regardless of how self-destructive it might be. It's part of how you survived or could feel safe.

There are many manifestations of Crisis Junkiehood. Procrastination is an obvious one. You bring in the term paper just under the wire, squeaking in by a hair's breadth. Whew.

Some women marry guys who will not accept responsibility, thereby setting themselves up to be Super Woman yet again. He won't get the tax return in on time? Not to worry. Super Woman will make it happen, with a Herculean last-minute save. And the barely-averted catastrophe squirts adrenaline into her body and acid into her spirit.

Supposing you grew up in a house where crisis was the default mode. It's Christmas. Poppa is, as usual, unable to endure the intimacy that family Christmas brings. Even though he craves it, he can't handle it, so he creates a dust-up and stomps out.

Neighbors come by to bring Christmas gifts. “Where’s John?” they ask. “Oh, he was called away on business,” Momma lies, fooling no one. Yeah. Right. On Christmas Day.

One friend asks another, “Why didn’t she just say that John got his tail over the dashboard and went off mad, and he’ll come back when he sobers up or feels left out?”

Impossible! In a crisis-ridden family, Poppa’s disappearance must be a *very big deal*. So the children cringe against Momma’s lap, once again told that it isn’t Poppa, it’s the Drink. Once again Poppa is not responsible for his actions, which have precipitated what Momma treats as a major crisis for which she must be brave and protect the children.

Imagine how it would play out if Momma were to simply say, “Kids, your Daddy has a hard time at Christmas. He’ll be back after a while. Now let’s just open presents and not worry about Daddy. He’ll come home when he feels OK again.”

Message to kids would be: It’s a pain in the neck and definitely puts a damper on the moment, but it’s just Poppa doing his thing, and it’s not about you, honey.

Crisis averted, or reframed as just another tantrum, not the end of the world as we know it.

You know what I mean. You’ve seen politicians, managers, families who crave or create crises. If you, too, grew up with anxiety messages, realize that you couldn’t ward them off. Your filters weren’t strong enough yet. But now you can. Now you can decline to be anybody’s rescuer or mother, except your own kids.’ And even with them, your job is to work yourself out of a job, help them be independent and fly.

Every day I see people who tell themselves that pouring out oceans of understanding and love will change their mates or their parents. But it won't, it doesn't, it can't.

Of course you should be kind, generous, helpful, empathetic. There is nothing wrong with giving. Giving is beautiful. But honey, you can take it to a terrible extreme if you sacrifice yourself for people who could change themselves but decline to.

Take care of your own inner Kid instead of trying to rescue other people's.

Honor Your Smoke Alarm

Once in millions of births there comes a child who cannot feel pain. The message of hurt from her nerve endings just doesn't get decoded in her brain. These children almost always die very young—they bleed or burn to death without the feedback warning of pain to alert them to danger.

Like pain, fear and anger are valuable feedback mechanisms, and so is uneasiness. You have an inner smoke alarm that warns you when something is not right, when someone's manipulating you. *Pay attention to it!*

You'd think by this time my own warning system would be fine-tuned, but sometimes it malfunctions. For example, I recently received a phone call from a man with an authoritative voice who said, "Is this Roz Van Meter? I'm with the National Security Board [or some such name], and we have discovered that your account numbers are all over the Internet."

"Oh, Lord! Should I call and cancel my bank card?"

“No, that won’t be necessary. We can take care of it from here.” The Marines have landed.

“Are you calling from my bank? What number are you calling from? Who did you say you were?”

“Mrs. Van Meter,” he said in a stern and reprimanding voice, “stop harassing me with all these questions. As soon as we finish here, you will be connected to our Confirmation Department, and they’ll tell you all that. Now, please look at your checkbook and read me the numbers on the bottom of your checks.”

The only reason I was still hooked is that I’d had some minor fraudulent charges recently cleared up, and at first I thought he was following up on those. But read him my account numbers? I don’t *think* so.

My inner smoke alarm finally went off.

I told him no and he said angrily, “Very well, if you want your account numbers all over the Internet!” and slammed the phone down.

A friend suggested that if such a call ever comes in again, I should say, “Gracious! Thanks for calling me. Hang on a minute while I get the FBI in on a conference call.” That loud sound in my ear will be the slicko hanging up.

It’s times like this when I need to remind myself, “Take care of yourself, dear heart. Embrace some healthy skepticism. And if your inner smoke alarm goes off, *do not pull out the battery!*”

How to Say No and Say It Nicely

“No thanks” is your best friend. Learn to say it easily, without

a second thought. Repeat after me: “No, thank you.”

If you are a Southern girl like me (sometimes excessively nice), you might need to elaborate just a little and use some of these phrases:

“I wish I could, but I’m already overcommitted. But thanks for thinking of me.”

“You know, I’ve already agreed to so many things, I only have time left for myself and my family. I know you’ll understand.”

“Sorry, that just doesn’t fit for me right now. I’m overextended.”

Energy Guardian at the Gate

There are days when you feel...not hopeless, just copeless. It’s not really depression, it’s just that blah, stop-the-world-I-want-to-get-off feeling. You are out of gas, out of energy, and out of sorts. Life is (temporarily) b-o-r-i-n-g, same old same old. Is this all there is? What to do?

Start with an analysis of your emotional bank account. Energy is the coin of life, and you deserve a healthy, positive balance. That requires making more loving deposits than weary withdrawals.

Always remember that energy follows attention. Whatever you focus on is where you invest your energy. Ask yourself, what are the biggest energy drains from your account right now: worry, unsatisfactory relationships, debt, work, clutter, too many yesses and not enough nos, taking care of everyone else before yourself?

Take a look at today's to-do list and divide the tasks into two columns: those that drain you and those that *restore* you. Now choose one thing from Column A to dump, and come up with a dandy new one for Column B. That's a great way to bring balance back into your life.

Renewal Strategies

How do you renew yourself? Some people need solitude and rest to replenish their energy. Others actually get energized by being with other people. One person gets a massage, goes to yoga class, turns off her phone, takes a nap. Another gets reenergized by taking a brisk walk with the kids, playing with the puppy, enthusiastically trying out a fascinating new recipe. No, really. I know a woman like that, and her friends like her anyway.

Personally, I like to flop on the bed and read a book or watch reruns of *Cheers* or *Will and Grace*. To each her own. Just pay attention to what drains you and what fills you up, and then honor your need to be filled.

Here are some other renewal strategies:

- Get a half hour more sleep at night and see how it feels. It's heavenly. A whole hour is even better.
- Give high priority to those things you are pulled toward, the ones that hummm to you.
- Make a Yeah! list of things that really get your motor going, excite and inspire you. Right now, for me, it's writing this book. When it's done, I'll go to the next thing on my high-five list.
- Get done with the hanging-over-your-head things,

like writing an overdue thank-you note, making a dental appointment, calling Grandma.

- Identify tasks where you can apply the three D's: Delegate it, Do it, or Dump it.
- Speaking of delegating, find someone who actually wants to do the things you're avoiding. The guy who mows and edges our yard started doing it in high school, and now he owns his own landscaping business. Actually, he himself doesn't mow and edge any more; he has a crew that does, and they like the work. Everybody wins.
- While we're on a delegating roll, how about having your house cleaned every couple of weeks? The lady who does it will be delighted to have a new customer, and meantime you can do something that fills your cup.
- Collaborate, network, join up. Having more heads and hands on a project not only makes it go faster, it's more fun.

The Great Escape

Through the magic of guided fantasy, you can take a mental trip as easily as Dorothy closed her eyes, clicked her ruby slippers together, and returned to her favorite place in the world.

You, too, can create your own personal Shangri-La. Here's how.

Get totally comfortable and relaxed, close your eyes, and imagine a beautiful staircase leading downward. You put your hand on the banister and begin to step down,

counting the ten steps as you descend. With each step you become more fully relaxed. 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

As you reach the bottom, you find yourself in the most ideal place you can imagine for a complete getaway. Maybe it's a beach, or a forest glade, or a soft spot of grass beside a brook in the woods. You get to decide what your personal sanctuary is.

Libby Gill, author of *Traveling Hopefully*, writes that her idyllic scene is a lovely cottage high on a bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean (translation: peaceful ocean). Her room is all curves and softness, with gauzy white curtains on the floor-to-ceiling windows. She can curl up in a special cream-colored chair, flanked with fluffy pillows, and gaze out to sea.

Imagine how that must be for her. She can hear the *shhh* of the little wavelets as they break on the sand below her. She can watch the changing hues of the sea and sky, feel the breeze, smell and taste that special salt air.

Like Libby, you can transport yourself to your own private sanctuary and stay there as long as you want, because dreamtime is different from ordinary time. When you return, you'll be refreshed and energetic, yet still calm.

Just don't do it when you're driving!

Simplify

All these ideas are in service to simplifying your life. Weed out. Give up your attachment to things. Still dwelling on a former relationship? Obsessing about a cranky coworker? Let it go! Up to your eyeballs with clutter?

Visualize the delighted new owner of your excess stuff and donate it.

My daughter Carolyn lives in Germany. Germany is a very small country. The Germans are brilliant at making every square inch work and keeping only what is currently useful, although I do envy them those big cellars for skis and bikes and such, which we in Texas don't have, being as how most of our houses are on concrete slabs. That's why God invented rental storage units.

Anyway, when I visit Carolyn and rudely peek into her medicine cabinet, this is what I find on her single cosmetic shelf: a small bottle of foundation, powder, blush, three eye shadows, two eyeliners, one mascara, and three lipsticks. Oh, and a cleanser and a moisturizer.

That's all most of us use, except we still keep those back-ups, the ones that mostly work but not really, but some day we might need one of those seventeen other lipsticks we haven't opened in years.

Great minds have told us the same.

Thoreau: Simplify, simplify, simplify...Our life is frittered away by detail.

Emerson: One "simplify" would have been enough.

Full-Bodied Support

When you're down in the dumps (what a visual *that* is), you need to call on your friends. A friend is someone who knows the song in your heart and can sing it back to you

when you have forgotten the words. It only takes a few, but you need an extended family of friends, a circle of buddies who encourage your growth, nurture you when you are hurt, and gleefully celebrate the wild child part of you.

You're a Big Girl when your closest friends are all Big Girls too, not frustrated mommas or orphans wearing "Adopt Me" signs. They are women who tell the truth and take care of themselves. When needed, they can take care of you too, not because you're pitiful or weak but just because you're going through a rough patch. They know you will emerge as competent as ever, but right now they will cherish and watch over you.

One of my clients is going through a horrendous divorce from a ringtail tooter of an emotionally abusive soon-to-be-ex. She is a marvelous woman. I tell her sincerely that she's the poster child for mental health, but sometimes she has a temporary meltdown from all the ways her ex is slimming her. She has a circle of friends, some from way back in elementary school, and they rally around her like the settlers circling the wagons against invading war parties.

I have some dearly beloved friends, but only two or three that are my soul sisters. That's all it takes. Even one is enough.

I wish you a soul sister who helps you tend your boundaries.

The Choice Community

The best tribes of friends are those who are alike in some ways and different in others. Below is an interesting exercise

that you and your friends might enjoy, and I hope you find it enlightening about yourself.

A version was floating around the Internet a few years ago. I have tried mightily to discover its source, but haven't been able to. So if you originated it, please let me know who you are so I can give you credit.

I've gussied it up a bit. Remember what Fairy always said: "Any story worth telling is worth putting a top hat and cane on."

In your imagination, take a walking trip through a forest. You approach a small village and are struck by the beauty of the setting. You feel an urge to stay here a while.

As you enter the village, its leader walks toward you and says:

Welcome to our village. We call it the Choice Community. Here you are encouraged to choose exactly how you would like to live, near people you feel a kinship toward or would enjoy learning from.

There are seven settlements. Each has room for neighbors and hospitality cottages for visitors. Feel free to visit any or all the settlements, then choose what fits for you.

Some people are relieved to find the tribe that matches their passions, interests, and ways of living, and they move in immediately. Of course, they are free to change their minds later.

Others stay in one settlement for awhile, then move to another, learning from each. Still others feel

an equally strong pull toward several, and maintain a cottage in each.

You cannot make a mistake. In this village there is no such thing as failure, only risk-free exploration.

The leader hands you a map to the seven settlements with a description of each. As you read, you feel an instinctive pull toward one of the settlements or aspects of several.

The Golden Retrievers

We are warm of heart, supportive of others, caring. Others seek us out to receive our inspiration and personal understanding. We enjoy interaction with others. We avoid confrontations, preferring instead to find harmony through compassion and empathy. We excel at kindness, appreciation, and affection. Among us are social workers, counselors, nurses, elementary teachers, and personal coaches.

The Lions

There is a reason our families are called prides: we do take pride in our decisiveness and strong points of view. We enjoy goal-oriented activities. We are confident and love to win. People who share our pursuits feel protected by our take-charge skills. We like quick results and sometimes get impatient and decide to do things ourselves. Among us are generals, statesmen, pilots, surgeons, managers, CEOs, and some entrepreneurs.

The Beavers

Our world revolves around information and analysis. We know that accurately stating the problem is essential to its solution. Through research and review we make discoveries. We excel at methodical inquiry and error-free outcome. We enjoy working at our own pace, and some people think we are slow, but we are not. We are purposeful, deliberate, and patient. Among us are historians, researchers, accountants, economists, judges, scientists, mathematicians, and IT professionals.

The Horses

We love to run, to feel our muscles, to pound across distances and leap over fences. We exult in our physicality and enjoy training to improve our speed, distance, and grace. Unlike some of our neighbors, we are grounded in our bodies and enjoy them. Some of us use sports, games, or competition as a way to celebrate our energy. Among us are gymnasts, hikers, bikers, runners, baseball and football players, and personal trainers.

The Otters

We are spontaneous, playful, sensual, excited lovers of life. We thrive on recognition from others, sharing our excitement, creating amiable partnerships. We have big hearts and inspire each other. We are swift to grasp concepts and can work tirelessly when we are fascinated, and we do not want to get bogged down in details. We trust our intuition and are sometimes called dreamers. Among

us are writers, painters, actors, dancers, choreographers, and playwrights.

The Foxes

We are natural persuaders, quick-thinking and often colorful. Other times we have a chameleon-like ability to blend and identify with our clients, customers, protégés, students. We enjoy finding the most effective approach to help others understand the importance of our message. We have the ability to tune in to people's needs, preferences, and values. Among us are negotiators, business trainers, salespeople, preachers, motivational speakers, public relations people, entertainers, and many business and relationship coaches.

The Owls

We enjoy conceptual thinking and long-range planning. We are sometimes called impractical, but that doesn't bother us. We enjoy problem-solving, though not necessarily implementation. We can construct whole universes in our imagination and postulate new theories. We enjoy sitting together and playing the "What if . . ." game. Among us are philosophers, futurists, strategists, economists, inventors, cosmologists, professors, and some entrepreneurs.

Did you find yourself among these descriptions? Most of us are a combination. I am mostly Otter, with a Fox tail and Golden Retriever paws.

I can see that a heavy-duty Lion-Horse might have

trouble connecting with a dyed-in-the-wool Otter/Golden Retriever, whereas a Beaver and an Owl might enjoy kicking ideas around.

Just be aware when you're around someone who has a personality you're allergic to. That doesn't make him or her wrong, just not a fit for you. *If your smoke alarm goes off, listen to it.*

Security Blanket

Good boundaries, whether on others or yourself, are like a security blanket that wraps a baby, holds in her warmth, and lets her know where she stops and the rest of the world starts.

Once again we find the Big Girl Panty-Wearer taking care of the Little Girl within, protecting her from intrusions, letting her play and grow in comfort and safety.

Chapter Ten:

Big Girl Valentine Panties



Immature love says: "I love you because I need you."
Mature love says "I need you because I love you."
—Erich Fromm

Of course you can live a happy, even joyful life with or without a significant other, but being in a committed relationship with a devoted partner can create special satisfaction.

Just remember a few things:

You are not responsible for another person's feelings (see Chapter Six), but you are responsible *to* and *with* your beloved for creating and nurturing your relationship.

You aren't from Mars and you aren't from Venus. No matter how cute a book title might be, you are not a stereotype. You are a unique individual who deserves to be treated and respected as such.

So is your partner!

Selection and Maintenance

Healthy love is when your mind and your heart are in agreement and working together.

There are two aspects to an ideal relationship, and it simply cannot work if you don't have both: wise, grown-up selection and attentive, loving maintenance.

You know what it's like to have a friendship that begins with all kinds of possibilities but fizzles out somewhere along the way. Maybe it just had a short shelf life to begin with—your mutual project ended, or the cruise ship reached its destination, and there wasn't enough connection between the two of you to keep it going. Or perhaps the friendship did ripen into a really good one, and you've remained friends for years. Just that, just friends.

Then there are the ones that turned into something deeper, a love affair or marriage, but contained the seeds of their own destruction. I have talked with hundreds of women who knew intuitively that they were making a mistake, maybe even at the top of the aisle, but overrode that still, small voice because they didn't want to make waves, or hurt people, or make momma mad, or be alone. And oh, how they regret not honoring their internal wisdom.

I don't believe there is just one "right" person for each of us. Perhaps there are different right people at different times. The important thing is to discern who's a fit for you and who's not, and then nurture and maintain yourselves with attention, appreciation, and pleasure in each other.

Many people put way more discernment into buying a

new house or car than choosing a potential partner. Be smarter than that.

Successful Selection: What It Takes

Be a conscious chooser, not just the chosen. Go slowly and choose wisely. If you select the wrong person, you can pour maintenance into the relationship and it still won't work. Even if you choose well, your relationship will wither if you don't put energy into nurturing it and each other.

It's not just about finding the right partner. First you need to become the right woman. No matter how much enthusiastic input you get from your excited Little Girl—in fact, probably in *spite* of it—your wise, judicious adult self must be the chooser or you can be in big trouble.

Here is a checklist that will help you make wise, conscious choices. You'll notice that they require a certain amount of experience, which is great. You get to review what you learned from all that life history. Get out some paper and actually write down your answers. Keep the paper handy, and update it from time to time.

1) Do you know *who* you are? Are you self-aware? Do you know your past patterns, the traits you particularly liked in former partners, maybe some familiar ways you've been known to shoot yourself in the foot? (No blame here, just awareness.)

2) Do you know *what* you want? Have you defined your requirements and deal-breakers? If you are in doubt, you might want to finish these sentences:

I don't want:

I hope:

I long for:

I fear:

I love:

I feel passionate about:

I will:

3) Do you know *how* to get what you want, including effective strategies for scouting, sorting, and screening? Not stalking, just getting out there where like-minded friends might be.

4) Are you a self-reliant, successfully single person, available to attract an equally self-reliant partner?

5) Are you ready for a committed love relationship, or at this particular time in your life do you prefer a bit more distance?

6) Do you have custody of yourself? Can you assert your boundaries, disengage where necessary, and say “no thanks” to what you don't want?

Selection Snags and Snares to Beware Of

Many a woman has tripped over some of these—maybe several of them, several times—before she woke up and smelled the coffee.

Rehab Project: Believing a fixer-upper will become kind/romantic/trustworthy/fair/sober/adult through the magic of being with you. Particularly dangerous when your goal is to make someone else happy. Can't be done. Your love can only help create an environment in which he'll be happy if he decides to.

Instant Fix: Looking for immediate gratification, rushing into too much intimacy too soon (including sex), leapfrogging over the friendship phase.

Hourglass Panic: Fearing the biological clock, or gravity, or your driver's license Date of Birth.

Masked Ball: Putting someone else's face onto him (unfinished business with the past).

Last Stagecoach Out of Dodge: Believing there is no one who will really fit, so you'd better grab a ticket fast or be alone forever (forgetting that there is no loneliness like the loneliness in a bad relationship).

Imprisoned in the Tower: Believing you must be rescued from your emotional or financial neediness, thereby attracting control freaks or codependent enablers.

WYSIWYG: Pronounced wizziwig. Believing that What You See Is What You Get. Hasty decision based on short-term impressions.

Infatuation Boogie: Interpreting attraction, need, chemistry, good sex, and/or attachment as love.

Feel-Good Trap: Assuming that if you have fun together you are *meant to be*.

Magic Trap: Believing that your ideal partner/soul mate will magically appear. (Note: The good candidates will not parachute down your chimney, girlfriend. You'll have to get out there.)

All-Or-Nothing: Evaluating people solely for their romance potential, instead of cultivating new friends.

Successful Maintenance: What It Takes

Whether you're in a new and hopeful partnership, or an old and seasoned one, it has to be maintained lovingly. Great Scott, you do that with your car!

Relationship maintenance, with yourself as well as someone else, means ***communication, respect, and affection***.

If you are already in a love relationship, do you remember when you and your Beloved were still in the “getting to know you” stage? You were each like a fascinating present waiting to be unwrapped. Now you know each other better than in the beginning, but are you seeing clearly or through the lenses of your own agendas?

Turn the lights down, get out some hors d'oeuvres and a glass of something cold, and have a conversation. Ask each other questions like “What was the scariest thing you ever did as a kid?” “Did you ever go to sleep-away camp? How was it?” “If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?” “If you could have any job in the world, what would you want?”

Some couples like to meet “accidentally” and talk as if they'd never met, maybe even taking on new identities. You'll be surprised what you can learn about each other.

Communication: Asking for What You Want

If you want more life in your relationship, you have to talk it over. Ask each other, “What do you want more of or less of?”

Maybe you'll decide to get more playful, give pet names to what Monty Python called your “naughty bits,” or

skinny-dip at midnight.

Or it may be that all you'll have to do is start telling your truth about what you want, what turns you off, what unfinished business you want to clear out and be done with.

Respect: Managing Conflict Hollywood Style

No less than Spielberg or Scorsese, you are in charge of the movie called *Your Life*. Your parents were the original producers, but now you're the boss. You are in charge of contract negotiations, script rewrites, casting, and directing.

Here are some techniques for resolving conflicts and disputes.

Head 'Em Off at the Pass!

In the old Westerns the sheriff cried, "This way, boys! We'll head 'em off at the pass!" The posse cut across, through, or around, and sure enough, headed the bad guys off.

You can do the same with conflicts that aren't necessary. Your early warning system tells you when your own personal bad guys are gathering inside. You feel irritable, defensive, hair-triggered.

Anger, like some drugs, puts you into your lizard brain. Here are some ways you can stay with your higher cognitions and character.

Know your cues. We all have pet peeves or recurring situations that tend to put us over the edge. Be aware of your

mood and stay prepared to respond (purposefully) instead of react (knee-jerk).

Make those role transitions. Find what works to move you from one role (job, workout) to another (playful parent, loving spouse). Give yourself a chance to decompress between one pressure and the next. Anger is like a tea kettle: when it's about to boil, you need to turn down the heat and chill out.

Costume changes. For some people, just changing uniforms is enough gear-shifting. Off with the pinstripe, on with the sweats. Off with the panty hose, on with the jeans.

Soundtrack. In movies you can tell by music cues when changes are about to occur. In real life, choose the music you know can help you shift from tense to relaxed.

Action! Change your activity, change your attitude. Exercise, swim, take a walk—they are all good strategies for blowing off steam.

Stunt person. If you just aren't up to a task, hand it off to your partner, with the understanding that you'll be his stand-in when needed.

Stop action. Use your pause button to create a breathing space that lets you choose your next behavior, not be at the mercy of an old script written by your seething or martyred Unconscious.

Breathe. Take a few deep breaths and exhale slowly. Now count down from 10 to 1; tell yourself that with each descending number you are getting calmer and more relaxed.

Character motivation. If you have a habit of being defensive, remind yourself that somebody's remark or

action may not have been about you personally. You may be the star of your show, but you aren't the center of the universe.

Shootout at the OK Corral (emphasis on OK)

When she was just twelve years old, Jodie Foster was in a great little movie called *Bugsy Malone*. It was a “gangster” musical in which all the characters are kids and the machine guns are loaded with marshmallows. If you and your partner really need a showdown, load your guns with marshmallows, and set these rules to protect the cast from injury:

Limit the scene. This is a discussion about one subject. Stick to that subject.

Know your lines. This means a clear definition of the subject (what's bothering you), how you *feel* about it, and what *resolution* you want. Dialogue: “Let me tell you what's going on with me. I'm feeling _____ about _____, and what I'd like/I need is _____.” This approach points your finger at yourself, not the other person, and so does not invite defensiveness or escalation. If you don't ask directly for what you want and suggest a solution, you're just complaining.

Take five. If tempers do escalate, call a short time out. You are not abandoning each other, just taking a break to get control of your reactions and turn them into responses.

Respect the other player. Be kind. You originally cast each other because you *liked* each other! Tune in to all the things you appreciate, and don't let a minor dispute get bigger.

Affection and Attention

These are the magic A's of a nurtured relationship: Affection and Attention.

Affection can be shown in so many ways. The best ones are purposeful and focused, not just mechanical. The warm enfolding embrace, not just an impersonal hug with a back pat-pat-pat. A soft-lipped kiss that's not a preamble to sex, but a kiss for its own sake. A warm cuddle that's unexpected, beyond the routine ones. A shared glance, unnoticed by others, that says "Hi, Sweetheart."

Attention consists of really noticing and tuning in to your honey. It can produce a wonderfully specific compliment—not just "you look nice," but "Honey, you look wonderful in that shirt. It's just the color of your eyes." Attention says you value each other. It conveys respect, acknowledges the other person's individuality, listens to the other's opinion even if you don't share it.

When I was to be interviewed for Valentine's Day, I anticipated that they would ask my definition of love. I wouldn't even consider trying to answer that one, but I did have one for romance, borrowed from someone else (you know who you are).

Romance, he said, is ingenious loving attention. How about that! Affection plus attention equals romance.

Grown-Up Fun and Games

Don't forget to be playful! Just as health is not simply the absence of illness, a healthy relationship is not just the

absence of dysfunction. It needs frequent infusions of grown-up fun.

Act like lovers again. Make out at the back of the movie theatre or in the car or on a quilt in the backyard. Leave charmingly suggestive messages on each other's answering machines (if they are private). Put on costumes or different personas. Play strip poker. Surprise each other with impromptu bed picnics or overnights at a bed and breakfast. Be open to delightful props or unexpected opportunities.

Take each other out, bring home little surprise gifts, leave sticky-note messages of delight and love on bathroom mirrors. Reciprocal appreciation and attention will make your romance bloom; I guarantee it.

A wise man once said that we don't remember days, we remember moments.

My favorite moments are when affection and attention come together to create The Memorable Event. Sometimes you will choreograph an adventure to surprise and delight your beloved. Occasionally something just appears from nowhere, a spontaneous or accidental happening that ends up being a fond, funny memory to gladden your hearts for years.

Here's one of mine.

Mud Wrestling for Valentine's Day

One Valentine's Day we wanted to surprise our long-time good friend Marci, who had introduced us, bless her heart. There was a Victoria's Secret-style show scheduled in a very nice restaurant, so we took her there and had

dinner while waiting for the show to start. We envisioned slender, lovely models in dreamy lingerie, negligees, maybe a little fur trimming. Sexy but tasteful.

After dinner was over we waited. And waited. And waited. Apparently the style show had been terminally delayed. Finally we gave up and decided to go somewhere else for our Valentine's Day romantic event.

Nearby was a place that usually featured Middle Eastern dancing, that truly gorgeous art form we call belly dancing. This place had been written up as featuring live music and outstanding professional dancers in elegant costumes. Great choice, we thought, and went there.

When we arrived, however, we found that the feature of the evening was not dancing. No. Their choice for Valentine's Day entertainment was (drum roll) mud wrestling.

Mud wrestling! I was indignant. Here our exquisite, glamorous evening had morphed into something lowbrow and vulgar. My buddies, however, were delighted. "Mud wrestling! I've always heard about it but never have seen it." Similar tastes. No wonder they'd been friends for so long.

So we went in and saw it.

In case you, too, are an innocent on the subject, let me describe it to you. In the middle of the floor in front of the stage was a ten-foot-square box lined with heavy plastic and filled with drilling mud, a very slippery substance used in drilling oil wells. (This was Texas, after all.) It looked like shiny, thick chocolate pudding.

Onstage, the spotlight hit a back curtain and around it from the left came a drop-dead stunning woman in a

glittering cloak and long satin gloves. She started to do a slow striptease, taking off her cloak, then gloves, then gorgeous satin gown, then one by one the sparkling garments underneath. She now looked like a high-wire artist at the circus, but still she stripped until she had on nothing but a glittering G-string and the muscles of a body-builder, and long shining blonde hair.

Then we realized that this was an actual, professional female wrestler.

The spotlight swung to the right and another vision emerged from behind the curtain, a long-haired brunette with similar costuming in a different color. She was even more ravishing and did a similar slow disrobing. Oddly enough, they did it with sensual dignity.

The women came down from the stage and ceremoniously stepped into the ring—that is, into the box of goop—and began to wrestle. They were deadly serious in trying to pin each other, but the silky lubricant made it almost impossible to get a grip, so most of their holds slipped and there was much rolling about in the mud. At the end you could see nothing but the whites of their eyes.

We were mesmerized. I was caught up in a whirl of reactions. They were being exploited. We were being exploited. They were serious bodybuilders and trained wrestlers, undeniably. This was Roman depravity. This was a lot of fun. I should be ashamed to be enjoying it. I was really enjoying it. Blah blah blah.

We all agreed it was an amazing event, and we went home.

I couldn't get it out of my mind. A week later, when Robert got home, I was waiting in a homemade costume. I had made my cloak from a cheap purple satin sheet with gold rope through the hem. My costume was improvised from a bathing suit with big sequins tacked on here and there. The satin gloves came from a second-hand clothing store.

After I strutted my stuff for a minute, I led him to the bathroom, where I had put a gallon of chocolate pudding in the tub.

I am here to attest that two adults cannot mud wrestle in a traditional bathtub. It was a great idea and we gave it a shot, but the housewife in me wasn't up to swabbing pudding off the walls, so we ended the escapade with hilarious laughter and showered off ourselves and the tile.

Still, it was such fun! Like playing mud pies, only you could eat the mud.

My Ball Trick

Sometimes a flirtatious event turns into a whoopee cushion, but that's OK. It can create a special memory in its own way, one you two can laugh about for years.

For example, my most embarrassing moment in the bedroom. We refer to it as Roz's ball trick.

One night Robert was leaning against the mirrored wall behind our bed and I was doing a very amateurish little striptease for him.

(Did you know there are exercise classes that specifically teach exotic dance moves? Videos, too. Supposedly terrific exercise.)

So there I was, humming “The Stripper” (dah da *dum*, *dah* da da *dum*, da da da da, *da da dum*) and taking it off. I pushed my panties down till they were a G-string, then said to him throatily, “Hey, Buster, wanna see my ball trick?” “You bet!” he said. So I rolled our big red three-foot exercise ball over and began to sit on it.

I don’t know what I had in mind. God knows I couldn’t bend my middle-aged back over it. I guess I was just going to shimmy a little. As soon as my weight began to settle on the ball, *ka-whoomp!* It shot out from under me like a squirted watermelon seed and caromed off the French doors at the end of the bedroom, and I got dumped really hard on my butt.

We both laughed so hysterically that romance went out the window.

Every now and then I’ll call him and murmur, “Hey, Big Boy, want to see my ball trick?” Lord, yes, he says. Lord, yes.

My Sister the Valentine

Mischievous humor runs in our family. Many long years ago, before the earth cooled, my sister wanted to surprise her husband on Valentine’s Day. She got a kiddy bow and arrow (suction-cup-tipped), assembled a diaper for herself out of a big dishcloth, put sequined heart pasties on her nipples, and waited for him to come home.

As he rounded the corner toward the bedroom, there she stood, a cross between Cupid and Venus. She wiggled her eyebrows, grinned, and said: *Twang!*

Roxie, My Alter Ego

Roxie emerged soon after my deep friendship with Robert had ripened into love with a capital L. She called him one day, and in a deep, husky voice said she'd heard he was a fabulous guy and she just had to meet him.

Of course, he knew it was really me, but he loved it. He and Roxie made a date to meet at a diner. He asked, "So Roxie, how will I know you?"

Roxie breathed, "Oh, you'll *know* me."

I showed up in slightly trashy clothes and way too many necklaces, sat down in the plastic booth across from him, and tried for half an hour to persuade him to take Roxie to Mexico. He was a stand-up guy, resolutely telling Roxie that he'd love to, he hated to turn her down, he just *hated* to miss out on such a great opportunity, but he was in love with a wonderful red-headed woman and was true to her.

Roxie finally gave up and stomped out.

When he came home that night I asked him innocently how his day had gone. Oh, the usual, he said.

Come to think of it, Roxie hasn't shown up in quite a while. Maybe by this time she could talk him into a rendezvous. He's older now and probably easier.

Feeling Safe

I like this quote from playwright Rose Franken: "Anyone can be passionate, but it takes real lovers to be silly." But that's just me. Maybe my adult games are *too* silly to be right for you. You know what fits for your personality and relationship.

Other kinds of surprises are wonderful too. Tickets to a hard-to-get concert or sporting event. Overnights to another city. I know a couple who visit bed and breakfast places every other month. There's no such thing as a failed experiment—they decide ahead of time to enjoy it, even if the bed turns out to be lumpy and the breakfast boring. It's the outing that is important, the excitement of running off together for a weekend. In fact, one of their favorite memories is renting a cottage they later discovered was right in the middle of a whoop-de-doo cattle drive reenactment. Not much sleep, but lots of fun.

The crucial thing is feeling safe with your beloved, having a no-fault agreement around surprises and excursions that are a little beyond your comfort zone. That's why I always recommend becoming deep, loving friends before taking a relationship to a more intimate level. Ask yourself, how much fun do you have with this person? Do you feel safe? Is your laughter shared, never condemning? Can you trust him in every way?

Can you talk openly, ask directly for what you want? Can you count on your honey to listen, keep a confidence, tell the truth, and comfort you when you need a bit of caretaking? Do you each pull your own weight?

Safety first, then play.

Other Friends

The word "relationship" is often a synonym for "love affair," but that's a mistake. You have relationships of all

kinds, and probably a couple of dear friends who have a permanent room in your heart.

Next year send them a valentine.

We're all in this life together, to ease the load for each other a bit and travel with as much heartfelt spirit and life appreciation as we can muster.

Valentine Yourself

The most important relationship you can have here on Earth is to love and appreciate yourself. All love for others flows from that.

On those days when you're feeling a bit wistful, give yourself a valentine in whatever way suits you best.

I wish you a Happy Valentine's Day, today.

Chapter Eleven:

Your Passion Quotient



Find out who you are and do it on purpose.

—Dolly Parton

The Balancing Act

Most of my clients carry large, responsible loads all day, and then barely find time for themselves. Weekends are filled with errands, clean-up, taxi service, family responsibility, house maintenance—and soon it's Sunday night and time to start all over. They want better balance in their lives.

Often that means waking up their sleeping passions.

Liberate Your Longings

What dream or goal have you sidetracked or postponed that wants you to wake up and Go For It? What would be the payoff, personally and professionally, if you designed the cost/benefit energy ratio so it really worked for you? Think of it as your ROI, return on investment of energy.

When have you shaken up your life, maybe even created temporary chaos, so you could push past the familiar and gain something new and important? How did it feel? What did you learn?

How would you like your life to come out? What is its next chapter?

Discovering Your Passions

You may be saying, “I don’t know what my passions are. I’m just getting through each day.”

Here are some questions to help you get back in touch with what turns you on. What positive things have people been telling you all your life about yourself? What do you love? What really matters to you?

Getting Past Your Yes-Buts

- List five things the voice of *no* says to you.
- List five things the voice of *yes* says to you.
- Let those voices dialogue with each other.
- Remember a time when you loved what you were doing. Update it.
- Decide what you want to stand for in your life, what you want it to be about.
- Start *declaring* what you want, instead of hoping for it.
- Follow your heart where excitement leads it. Follow your bliss.
- What will you have to give up? Are you willing to? Any answer is OK.
- Love the process (e.g., writing), not just the outcome (e.g., book).
- If it doesn’t make money, so what? Give it away!

The Killer Swans

I know a woman who had always wanted to be a ballerina. Ever since she was a tiny little girl, she would ask for ballet slippers or a tutu. She pirouetted around the house, watched starry-eyed at the *Nutcracker* every Christmas. Alas, her parents didn't have money for ballet lessons.

Fast-forward three decades. In her mid-thirties she began to take ballet lessons. A few years later, she and seven other middle-aged women formed a ballet troupe they called The Killer Swans. To watch them perform is an absolute delight. They are hilarious, touching, surprisingly good, and incandescent with joy.

At her thirtieth high school reunion, she belly-danced for an astonished group of her classmates, most of whom had remained in their little town and were now teachers, meter readers, or managers of the feed and seed store.

Give 'Em the Old Razzle-Dazzle

That reminds me.

I know a woman who was so painfully shy in high school, she managed to be almost invisible. People looked right through her, walked right by her, and never really saw her.

She was a late bloomer who ultimately became attractive, poised, confident. But when the invitation came for her twentieth reunion, she was aware that no one back home had seen her new self.

She had a male friend who was a knock-out hunka-hunka-burnin'-love guy. She approached her pal with this

idea. “Studly,” she said, “I need a boyfriend who will knock their socks off.” (Actually, her exact words were, “I need a boyfriend who will knock their dicks in the dirt.”) He was tickled to comply.

They showed up at the reunion and stunned the former classmates. He gave adoring attention to her, kept an arm around her waist, planted the occasional reverential kiss on her dewy cheek. The former cheerleaders, mostly chubby now, watched with raw envy. The guys looked at each other as if to say, “How did we let her get away?”

It was swell.

Little Girl Dreams, Big Girl Moxie

The Little Girl within is the most precious part of you. She is the reason you put your Big Girl Panties on—to achieve what it takes to bloom your spirit, and to head off at the pass whatever or whoever might try to rain on your parade.

Whatever you truly love that’s important to your spirit, honor it, open doors for it, let your dreams out to breathe and flourish.

Control-Top Thinking

I will never forget Elizabeth.

I was eighteen and still in college. Elizabeth was a twenty-three-year-old *career woman* with a glamorous (to me) job working on a newspaper.

Glamorous or not, it was apparent that Elizabeth was rather poor. She lived in Mrs. Fulbright’s house in a rented

room, with kitchen privileges. Elizabeth brought her lunch in a brown bag. She always bought her own Coke and wouldn't let anyone else pay for it. For entertainment back then we mostly had conversation and a little cheap wine. Elizabeth worked, read books from the library, and cooked her dinner at Mrs. Fulbright's house.

She seemed quite content. The closest to a complaint she ever gave was when she said wistfully, "I do wish I had a radio." I delightedly offered to buy her one, but she wouldn't hear of it. Finally she agreed that if I could find one in a repair shop that hadn't been reclaimed, she'd buy it. I found one (of course), and then at least she had a radio.

Ten months later Elizabeth sold her old car, told us all goodbye, and left for Europe. She had been saving every expendable dime so she could live in Rome for several months while she hunted for a job in Europe.

She ended up editing a newspaper on an American military base, making twice what she'd earned at home. She bought a little car, gassed it up at the PX, and spent every other weekend exploring the countryside of Italy and all its nearby European neighbors.

We friends started comparing notes and realized that Elizabeth had always had a profound interest in Rome, the Italian language (her minor in college), and travel. A quiet passion burned beneath her serene exterior. She nurtured the dream and marched resolutely toward it.

I think of Elizabeth every now and then, when I'm deciding whether to delay gratification for a longer-range

goal. I imagine her looking at the menu at a hamburger and Coke, and then saying to herself, “Nope, I’d rather wait for an *espresso* and some *biscotti* at an outdoor café in Rome.”

Elizabeth realized the real meaning of discipline: just remembering what’s important. And budgeting? Just deciding what you’d rather have, not frittering money away on stuff you don’t really *really* want.

Marsha’s Magical Moves

Years ago I had a friend who moved every year from one wonderful, huge old flat to another, in an artistic, shabby-but-genteel part of town. High ceilings, oak floors, tall windows, space heaters, antiquated kitchens, tiny bathrooms, two closets, and infinite charm.

Marsha had a wonderfully eclectic art collection, all cheap and all amazing—found objects, striking prints and collages, a stained-glass-looking portrait done in Crayolas.

Each time she moved, she did two things I remember with admiration:

1) She gave each piece of furniture and art a new role. The painting that had been featured over the fireplace in the former apartment now graced the bathroom. What had been a dresser in the last place became a dining room sideboard in the new one. Or the dining room was transformed into a cozy library.

2) After we semi-hippie friend movers had left, she would unpack her grandmother’s cast iron skillet and fry up bacon and then onions in the grease. When the

bacon-and-onion smell permeated the whole apartment, she had claimed her new place—her sacred space till next year when she was ready for a new arrangement.

To those of us who were stuck in situational inertia, Marsha's adventuring was a revelation. Years later I came to understand that you can shake up your life without moving to new digs. Besides shuffling the furniture around or spiffing up with a new rug or paint job, you can also reexamine your old perceptions, rearrange your attitudes, be open to new ways of thinking and seeing. It's exciting to visit a museum or art gallery and look at the works in a new way. They haven't changed; you have!

The Passion/Energy Connection

Energy! It is the fundamental force of the universe. One of the primary hallmarks of passion is the energy it *inspires* but also *requires*.

Passion can be self-replenishing for a while. We can get so wholly absorbed in a project, game, art work, or love affair that time freezes in our awareness. Eventually, though, we come back to everyday reality and discover the tired back, gritty eyelids, general weariness.

Protecting your energy, managing your life prudently to provide time and zest for passion, requires focus and discipline—but the outcome is well worth the effort.

Stairway to the Sky

Springtime is like opening the door to a stairway upward, toward the sky. All you have to do is point it toward where

you really, *really* want to go, and then just take one step at a time till you get there.

- Imagine. Think about what you really want. Visualize it, fantasize yourself moving through it—feeling, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting what it would be like. That may take a while, but it’s hugely exciting.
- Decide. Is it time? Do you really want it now? Is the price of admission too high at this time, or is it worth it?
- Strategize. Figure out what you can offload to make time and energy for climbing. Maybe less late night TV, earlier to bed, earlier wake-up. Need a break to think about it? Tell your loved ones you need a weekend alone, and ask for help to make it happen.
- Just do it. One step at a time.

Announcing that you’re gonna go for it is powerful. Somehow that declaration gives extra lift to your wings, extra spring in your steps on the stairway.

Remember to have a good time while you’re stepping. It’s the trip itself that’s most worthwhile, not necessarily the destination.

Which is true of life, come to think of it.

Success Stories

- A highly successful tech writer has committed three hours a week to a long-dreamed-of novel, and so far has sent me the first five chapters. I can hardly put it down!
- A single professional woman has put her house on the market, realizing she wanted a condo instead—less upkeep, less expense, more time and money for living.

- A physician has cut back his practice by one day a week. That's all he wanted, just one day to do whatever he feels like. No projects, just balance and lightness.

It's Your Turn

If you're wary of making a new leap, fearful about the unknown, stuck in an unfulfilling place, paralyzed by the naysayers and prophets of doom, consider this pseudo-Latin slogan:

Illegitimi non carborundum! Don't let the bastards wear you down.

Take the chance, open the door, reach for your passion, go for it! You have then and you have now. Where do you want to go now?

Chapter Twelve:

Bodacious Beauty Britches



I think your whole life shows in your face and you
should be proud of that.

—Lauren Bacall

Celebrate Your Unique Gorgeousness

I know, I know, you hear a voice within saying, “Gorgeous? Not me.” But that’s just the Little Girl insecurity talking.

In truth, there was never another person just like you, nor will there ever be. You are a completely original assembly of atoms, all of which were once stardust, literally. Just as you are, you are gorgeous.

One of my favorite movies is *Don Juan de Marco*. Johnny Depp plays a young man who believes he is Don Juan, the world’s greatest lover. To him all women are beautiful, they just need to have that beauty released by loving attention.

I think he’s right.

Fortunately, you don't need an external appreciation to liberate that beauty. You have only to give it to yourself.

Make-Up to Enhance, Not Erase

Don't get me wrong. I use makeup and enjoy the outcome. My face is pale, my lashes almost transparent, and these days my red hair is helped along by my hairdresser.

Not only that, but I have the Hollingsworth nose. Jim Hollingsworth, my biological grandfather (Fairy's first husband, Ethel's father), apparently had a...um...largish nose. Ethel got it, my cousin Betty got it in spades, and I got it. I've learned to tilt my head slightly upward when being photographed.

Still, I am thrilled to have the Hollingsworth nose. Except for the red in his beard, there is nothing else my grandfather passed on to me. I love feeling connected to my forebears, being part of a tribe.

Probably your face and body have some family characteristics. Please respect and even treasure them, instead of striving for Barbie-hood. You're worth more than that.

Hourglass Observations

Remember the little princess who got hexed by the Dark Fairy? That's what the beauty biz is doing to women in our society. We are programmed to believe that natural is ugly. Why? So we'll buy products!

If you're into math, by now you've deduced that I am, as the French say, a Woman of a Certain Age, and I say:

Your age is a number, not a sentence!

Let me offer my antidote to the whole ooga-booga put-down attitude about aging . If you're under forty, I invite you to come up with your own version.



The Stages of Middle Age

40–49 Early Middle Age

50–59 Middle Middle Age

60–69 Mature Middle Age

70–79 Profound Middle Age

80–100 Seasoned Citizen



In my Daddy's day there was a widely loved baseball player named Satchel Paige. He once said, "How old would you be if you didn't know how old you was?" Brilliant.

Your body may well know that it's getting on in years, but your spirit won't unless you betray it.

There is the well-known quote from Wallis Simpson, the woman for whom a king of England gave up the throne and began fifty years of shallow loneliness. Mrs. Simpson said: "You can never be too rich or too thin."

I say, "Oh, yes you can. Both."

Maybe you've been told that you are over the hill at thirty, or forty, and certainly fifty.

I say, "And what wonders there may be, just over the hill."

You are told, "Youth is good. Middle age is terrible. Old is pitiful." My take is, "Young was traumatic, middle-aged is terrific, and old will be an adventure on which you take your knapsack filled only with the

good stuff you've learned, discarding the junk to lighten the load."

I've taken an informal poll among my friends and colleagues, asking their take on getting older. Here's what some of them said.

- "Where is it written that tight and hard and flat are better than warm and soft? Which is more cuddly, comfy, nurturing?"
- "I actually look forward to old age. I can become (increasingly) eccentric the way my grandmother did, and many people will enjoy it. Even if they don't, I will, and the people who love me will. I don't need cheers from millions." (OK, so that was me. I'm a friend of mine too.)
- "Who would you rather be, someone who anxiously peers in the mirror hunting for white hairs, or someone who's playful, gutsy, and exuberant?"
- "People of all ages will be drawn to you like moths to a dancing flame. Best of all, you will have challenges, triumphs, and fun all your life long."

Cosmetic Surgery: An Epidemic

Some of us are *voluntarily* being turned into Stepford Wives—carbon copies of each other, paying big bucks to sacrifice our originality. In a neighborhood restaurant I recently saw a photo of all the cheerleaders at a local high school in a wealthy neighborhood, and so help me God, I could not tell them apart. They had the same identical shade of blonde hair, long and ironed straight. They had

identical eye makeup. They all had the same friggin' *nose*. It was spooky. Sixteen-year-olds whose parents had already supported them through plastic surgery to get *exactly the same nose*. I know teenagers want to conform, even if it means piercings and tattoos, but trust me, this was weird. It looked like someone had done a PhotoShop job on actual human beings.

There are women who have had ten, fifteen, even twenty rounds of cosmetic surgery. Each time they emerge looking a little less human, but *tight*, honey. They've had their faces lifted so often, they should be talking through their belly buttons. Their puffy lips look like small internal organs that have somehow migrated to the mouth. Their faces cannot move from the eyes up, giving them a perpetually astonished look. Their skin has been resurfaced so many times, it looks waxed.

These women have a medical/psychological condition called body dysmorphic disorder, in which a person obsesses about a disliked body feature, and this obsession severely interferes with her existence. It's tragic.

I read a delicious quote from master actor Sir Ian McKellen. He said, "The thing you notice here in England, after being in America, is how refreshingly ordinary people look, because they haven't had their chin wrapped around the back of their ears."

The Straight Skinny

Along with surgery goes the real or perceived need to be *thin*. Models are chosen for their child-like bodies, devoid

of breasts, hips, or buttocks. It's as if the tastemakers are saying, "The ideal sexual fantasy woman is a *prepubescent child*." There they are in our magazines, all matchstick limbs and hollow eyes, looking like concentration camp victims.

Meantime, little bitty girls are being dressed like hookers, or at least like grown-ups, when their age is still in the single digits.

What craziness! Grown-up women aren't supposed to look like children, and vice versa. Eat right and take care of yourself, be fit—even lean if that's what your genetics dictate—but don't get brainwashed into feeling inferior if you have ample curves, or maybe are even a little fluffy.

Fast Ways to a Stronger, Sexier Bod

Of course you want to feel and look good in your bodacious beauty britches. Here are the two best, quickest, easiest exercises I know. I recommend that you do them at every red traffic light or one-minute break in your day. They work together to strengthen, tone, and support your core muscles.

The Belly Scoop. Exhale completely, then take a deep breath and tighten your belly muscles from way deep inside, pulling your belly button back toward your spine. Hold it for a few seconds, and release. Do it again till the light changes, doing the tummy tighten-scoop each time. You are accomplishing three things: a splendid oxygen exchange, flatter belly, and released tension.

Kegels. The second exercise is called “doing your Kegels,” named after Dr. Arnold H. Kegel, who developed it—although I suspect courtesans knew about it centuries ago. Kegels tone up your pubococcygeal muscle (the PC), a bundle of muscle fibers supporting your entire pelvic region.

To isolate your PC muscle, go to the bathroom and start-stop your urine. The muscle that stops the flow is your PC; you can literally feel it rising up as you contract it.

With a little practice you will get to know your PC muscle better and will be able to isolate it, so you can flex and release it even when you have a full bladder.

Doing Kegels will not only help with your abdominal strength and bladder control, it can also give your Honey a kind of inner hug during sex. Extra benefit.

Get on the Ball

I have owned just about every indoor exercise device known to man. I’ve had a miniature trampoline, a rowing machine, exercise bike, treadmill, and complete home gym that loomed like an extraterrestrial praying mantis. Most of them ended up as drying racks for hand laundry. Our garage was the bone yard of discarded machines until I finally sold them at a huge discount.

I’ve been on devices that hung me upside down till my eyes bulged. I’ve owned three ThighMasters, so I could use them at the house, the office, and the lake cottage. I’ve had dumbbells (don’t go there) of various weights. I’ve used Thera-Bands, a brightly-colored cross between an outsized rubber band and a tape worm.

You name it, I've tried it. What did they all have in common? They were *no fun*.

For the past three years I've been "on the ball"—three exercise balls, actually—and they've been the best exercise stressbusters I've ever tried. On the others, I huffed and I puffed and I wore myself out, which is supposed to reduce stress but left me exhausted.

The exercise balls are different. I drape myself over the big red one and feel my spine slowly releasing tension as I grow spaces between my vertebrae and serenity in my soul.

I put the smallest (yellow, only half-inflated) between my knees and squeeze till the resistance is perfect, and I'm not feeling bruised like I did with the ThighMaster.

The green one provides the best workout. I have a videotape of rolls, lifts, walk-outs, and belly dancer rotations that loosen my pelvis and energize my whole being.

Then I revisit the red one for a final stretch.

When I finish my ball work, I walk differently. I stride confidently. I'm energized and relaxed at the same time. Satchel Paige, the beloved baseball player, said, "When I walks, I jangles." That's the feeling—all loose and easy.

If you can't find them at equipment stores, there are lots of websites that sell them (search by "exercise balls"). When yours arrive, just ask your local bike shop to inflate them for you. Of course, you might need a big-car buddy to help you haul the largest one.

At the end of our bedroom, standing against the French doors, are three such balls of various sizes. Sunlight turns

them into glowing sculptures. We used to feel a little defensive about them as a decor statement, but now we like 'em.

Want a great stressbuster? Get on the ball!

Overcoming Fashion Passion

There is a huge difference between fashion and style. *Fashion* is what the trendy designers say it is. One year it's cinched waists and full skirts, the next it's shabby chic. And so it goes, mainly to keep fashionistas buying the latest fashion. *Style*, on the other hand, is the look/feel/colors that suit you. If you prefer jeans and sweaters, that's your style, regardless of the flowing gypsy garb of the woman next to you. Gypsy is *her* style.

It only makes sense to dress in a way that makes you feel beautiful. You also may want to do some sleight-of-mind about something you can't change. For example, since I have to wear orthopedic shoes, I dress from the ankles up. I can be a vision in silk and lace, and still those clodhoppers will complete (compete with, actually) the ensemble. So what? Like my momma said, "What is is." I am not about to let those shoes spoil my day. I simply put on a knockout necklace to draw attention upward, and clomp away. If anyone thinks I don't *know* that leather lace-up shoes don't go with silk, that's their problem, not mine.

Whether you are a cotton briefs girl or a g-string diva, your style is your own. Celebrate it! Play with it. As in so many other aspects of life, *you* get to decide.

Top Five Beauty Secrets

1. *Love your body.* Never mind those anorexic models. You are a woman, not a child. Besides, *your figure is not your body.* Your figure will change, soften, become comfier, but your body is with you always, your own precious space suit on Mother Earth.

Memorize your skin, your curves and hollows. With a hand mirror, get to know your hidden rose with its delicate petals. Gotta love your body!

2. *Fire your scorekeeper.* If your inner critic starts to hiss in your ear about how you look, sound, smell, jiggle, move, respond, just gently release him back into the ether. He is not your friend. Do not give him squatter's rights to your mind. You are lovely just as you are, and that's the honest truth.

3. *Boost your SF.* How's your Strut Factor? Try it out. Walk with your head up and your neck long, shoulders down and back, chest up. Swing your legs out from the hip, long mile-eating strides, and say *Yes!* to yourself. No Chinese-bound-feet mincing steps for you. Walk out loud! If it doesn't fit for you, tone it down a bit, but keep the *Yes!* feeling.

4. *Master your breathing to s-l-o-w down.* Learn to breathe into your belly, till you can see it fill and rise. This belly breathing slows and deepens your relaxation. You can feel the tension drain from your face and body.

5. *Keep moist.* The best beauty secret is water. Drink a lot of it. It will plump your face, lubricate your joints, satin-up your skin.

Just for Fun Quotes...

"If you are what you eat, maybe I'd better lay off the Jell-O."

—Overheard in a cafeteria line.

"I'm not overweight, I'm just nine inches too short."

—Shelley Winters

"I've been on a constant diet for the last two decades. I've lost a total of 789 pounds. By all accounts, I should be hanging from a charm bracelet."

—Erma Bombeck

"My doctor told me to stop having intimate dinners for four. Unless there are three other people."

—Orson Welles

"Never eat more than you can lift."

—Miss Piggy

"The only time to eat diet food is while you're waiting for the steak to cook."

—Julia Childs

Satin Doll

I wholeheartedly believe in *pampering* yourself. Beauty sleep, satin and lace, beauty baths, candles by the tub and guitar music on the boom box, elegant sheets, sensuous nighties or slinky PJs.

On the other hand, if you like to sleep in a soft cotton t-shirt and your idea of a beauty treatment is to cut your own hair with manicure scissors, go for it! Whatever fits for you is your own business and privilege, as well as your unique style.

Supreme Self-Care

The next chapter is an alphabet of self-care. I hope you will use it to find pleasure, joy, serenity—whatever you want and need to nurture your heart.

Chapter Thirteen:

Alphabet of Self-Care



Act as if you were already as powerful as you intend to be.

It'll happen sooner that way.

The act-as-if strategy is one of the best ways to psych yourself into your next level of the big Cs: confidence, competence, and courage.

Confidence. Confidence is situational. Maybe you have zero confidence in your ability to change a tire because you never cared to learn how, you just call AAA. On the other hand, perhaps you have supreme confidence in your ability to make soup. You can make it from scratch with leftover veggies and a box of broth and plenty of garlic, or you can follow any recipe, even for Russian borscht that you've never even seen. You have confidence that you're a soup-making maven.

Think of a setting in which you are already confident, and pull that energy into yourself. Or else picture someone who has the confidence you want for a particular situation, and ask yourself, "How would s/he handle this?"

By the way, remember that it's perfectly all right to have a bit of up-and-down in the confidence department. Everyone does.

Competence. Another version of "act as if" is called "fake it till you make it." I've seen people get jobs they had no actual background in, but the applicant knew she could pick the skills up quickly, and invariably she did. She just jacked up her confidence, realized she had always been a fast on-the-job learner, and strode on through.

A fresh eye can often bring innovation and creativity. Just ignore the gremlin that might sit on your shoulder and call you a fake. This is what's known as the Imposter Syndrome, and everyone who ever took a tall step has experienced it.

It's especially true when you start out in a new endeavor.

That's when you need the third C: courage.

Courage. Remember the Cowardly Lion in *The Wizard of Oz*? In spite of being a quaking furry mass of abject terror, he persevered with Dorothy and her other companions.

That's the thing about courage. It is not the absence of fear; it's pushing through with guts and faith even when you're afraid.

I have a friend who's facing major surgery in a few months, and for a long time she was pretty scared. Her way of handling it was to gather all the information she could find about the procedure, to help give herself the illusion of control. Now she has let cheerful courage take over, and though it sounds kind of woo-woo, it works. She is not scared anymore.

Be gentle with yourself.

Build in time for moseying.

When you're in the grips of a hurry-up anxiety, one of the best antidotes is to literally slow yourself down. Start with slow, deep breaths. Let your chest cave in a little on the exhale, and do a little huff-huff-huff to get your lungs completely deflated, then take another slow deep breath. Slower, deeper. Feel relaxation pouring through you like warm honey.

If you are having a conversation or delivering a speech and find yourself accelerating, concentrate on talking more s-l-o-w-l-y. The first time you try this you may feel weird, as if the other person will view you as an alien life form. Actually, though, the best actors know the power of slowed-down speech. It will not only help you relax, it can deepen the connection with another person.

As for moseying, consider setting up an opportunity for hammock mode. You needn't have an actual hammock, but you can take a break and completely relax.

If you grew up in a family with high expectations, or if you tend to strap perfectionism onto yourself, just stop and consider the Big Deal Scale. Whatever you're obsessing or worrying over, how big a deal is it, really, in the grand scheme of things?

Be as kind to yourself as you would be to any other friend.

Call on your friends, your support system.

They love being asked.

Life is not a do-it-yourself project. Sometimes it takes buddies to pull you through narrow apertures or unlock doors. “Will you help me?” is almost as good as “I’d like your advice.” Your friends will help you make it through just about any challenge you face, and they’ll love being asked.

Many years ago, my best friend was in a horrendous accident that fractured her pelvis. I was in her hospital room every day for over a week. She was pretty high on morphine but sounded fully present, though woozy. She said what bothered her most was that she couldn’t shave her legs.

The next day I brought in shave cream, a razor, a pan of water, a soft towel, and body lotion. I tenderly shaved her legs, rinsed them well, patted them dry, and smoothed on the lotion.

A week later, when the narcotics had worn off somewhat, she said sadly, “I just don’t understand why you never came to see me.” We still laugh about it.

You don’t have to go under the knife to ask for help! Just do it, even if all you want is a sympathetic ear while you vent about something. A really smart friend will eventually say something like, “I’m good for about five more minutes, sweetie,” because she knows how to set boundaries on herself and not get pulled into the drama.

Discard your unloved garments.

Someone else needs them.

One of the best ways to take care of yourself is to lighten

your load, clear out excess. Not only will it declutter your closet, it may encourage someone when she most needs help. (Don't you love that word "encourage"—literally, "give heart.")

Most cities have agencies that help disadvantaged women polish up their job and interview skills. Imagine how much more confident such a woman will feel wearing one of your outfits. There is no faster way to build confidence than to know you look good. So share, already!

Enjoy making your own decisions!

Certain decisions are yours and yours alone, even when you live with others. I'll leave it to you to choose what they are. One that leaps to my mind is weight loss. I'm the only one who can make that decision and implement it, and unless I'm already a size six (pause for uproarious, eye-wiping hilarity), I can trust my own judgment about how to go about it.

Find what really, really lights your fire.

If you don't like what you're doing, don't do it! Or at least find something additional that you love to do.

I know a physician who became frustrated with the way health services are performed today. She finally gave up her lucrative practice and turned her dining room into a Pilates studio. She gives individual lessons in this marvelous exercise that lengthens and strengthens muscles.

Her income is down 75 percent, and she is the happiest she's ever been.

Another friend gave herself a year to write a sweeping novel about her eccentric Irish family. For nine months she kept working her daytime job while she wrote mornings, nights, and weekends. Finally she took a three-month leave of absence and finished an excellent second draft. She's waiting now to hear whether the sale went through, but the main thing is, she always wanted to be a writer, and now she is one.

I know a man who plays great jazz saxophone, but he is realistic enough to know he can't make a living that way. So, on weekends he and some other jazz buddies get together and jam, and sometimes they get paying gigs.

If you have an old calling, pull it out, dust it off, and have another go at it. If you can't think of one, just let your mind drift back to times you've been the happiest, and take your cue from there.

Give yourself credit for all your triumphs and lessons.

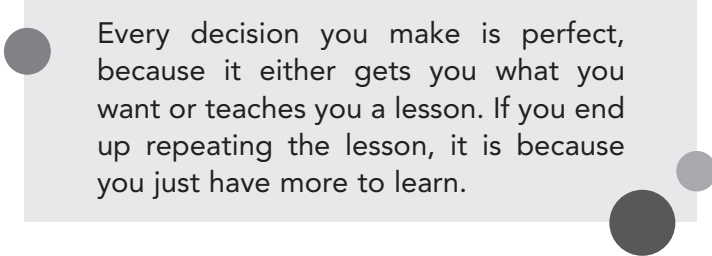
You were born without a skill in the world, just reactions. In the first few years of your life you learned a staggering amount. Think of it! You learned to pull yourself to a standing position, take a few tentative steps, fall on your little butt, make some course corrections in your brain, pick yourself up and start again.

Although scientists tell us that the human brain is prewired to learn language, imagine how complex a skill

that is. You speak your mother tongue effortlessly, maybe a couple of more besides.

You learned to communicate, connect, experiment, explore. You're still doing that, every day of your life. Like the toddler, you've plopped on your behind more than once, learned the lesson, and carried on.

Here is my Forward Only Theory:



Every decision you make is perfect, because it either gets you what you want or teaches you a lesson. If you end up repeating the lesson, it is because you just have more to learn.

Howl at the moon.

Really!

Even if you've seen it before, rent the movie *Moonstruck* and enjoy it all over again. The old man with all the dogs is a wonder. He takes them out to a park when the moon is full, and they all howl together.

I am totally serious about this: look at your calendar and see if it shows the phases of the moon. Write down the date of the next full moon and plan a celebration. It can be just you with yourself or with others. At your chosen moment (midnight is nice) go out and howl at the moon. It feels wonderful! We did it just last week, and a couple of the neighborhood dogs joined in.

If there are clouds overhead, just reschedule it for next month.

By the way, do you know what a blue moon is? It's the second full moon in the same calendar month. Very rare and special.

Invoke yourself out on a date, and make it special.

I suggest to my client couples that they take turns being the host and the guest of honor on weekly dates. The host looks at the weekend guide and chooses something happening in town that s/he thinks the Beloved will enjoy. The guest of honor's job is to be an enthusiastic and appreciative receiver and a good sport if the tractor pull isn't wonderful.

Think of the possibilities if you are both the host *and* the guest of honor. No one knows how to take care of you like you do! You are bound to choose something that at least looks appealing, and you can grin and shrug your shoulders if the new Ethiopian restaurant isn't all you'd expected. Hey, it's fun to eat with your fingers sometimes, remember?

I just got back from two hours at a spa where I got a facial at one end and a pedicure at the other, while lying on a warmed bed, covered with a soft sheet and blanket. I have never ever done that before, but I'm absolutely going to do it again, maybe once a month. I have a date with myself.

What special date would you like to take yourself on?

Jazz up something in your house.

High-cal version: hire a contractor and add a new wing.

Middle-cal version: replace the back wall of the bedroom with French doors.

Low-cal version: just buy a set of new towels and matching shower curtain, and donate the old ones. Honey, towels take decades to wear out, while you grow increasingly sick unto death of that color. Go ahead and toss in a new bath mat, too. Throw caution to the winds.

Honestly, a new something—a comforter, gorgeous throw pillows—can do wonders for your morale. If you can't spend twenty thousand dollars, settle for twenty.

If you are totally, stony broke, try just moving stuff around. Rearranging the furniture and art can make an old room hum. Swap out a nightstand for a narrow desk, and move the nightstand into the living room as an end table.

I don't know. It's your house. Have some fun with it. For inspiration, revisit Marsha's Magical Moves in Chapter Eleven.

Keepon keeping on, one day at a time.

The best is yet to come. That's the truth.

Even though you might often feel like dancing, life can sometimes become one big trudge. The secret is to just keep putting one foot in front of the other. This too shall pass.

I don't cotton to the notion that pain is God's way of showing you how much you can take. Sometimes,

though, it's inevitable. People die on you, move away, or at the very least let you down. Gravity and worn cartilage are bound to set in if you hang around long enough, but life is so interesting, it's worth doing.

Think back to former trudges. They eventually either led to the hoped-for goal or finally faded away. Keep the faith and just keep on keeping on.

Why do I say the best is yet to come? Because the past is over, the present is a known quantity, and the future is a bundle of surprises, unexpected plot twists, and cast changes. You can either find that unsettling or exciting. Since you are the one who tells your brain what to think, I suggest you vote for exciting or at least intriguing.

Let go of blame—everybody's, your own included.

There is no rewind button for life. Say it again: *there is no rewind button for life*. We are all doing the best we can at a given moment, even if we smite our foreheads shortly thereafter when a much better alternative occurs to us.

Take a look at something you regret and see if amends can be made. If so, make them and then let it go. If not, let it go anyway.

You are the exact sum of all your life experiences, the noble and ignoble. Either you learned from your (or someone else's) mistakes and decided it was only a Two on the Big Deal Scale, or else you're still obsessing about it. Let it go and get on with your life, but do treasure the learning experience.

That reminds me of a client who said, “Around our office we say, please, no more AFLOs today.” I asked her what an AFLO is. “Another foolish learning opportunity!” (only foolish was not the “F word” she used).

Make a list of your blessings.

Really notice all the good stuff.

Isn't it amazing that there is a place in your house where you can stand and have clean, fresh, hot water flow over you whenever you summon it? With the turn of a dial on the wall you can create instant summer or winter. With the flick of a switch you can turn night into day. You can pick up a phone or sit at a computer and instantly communicate with friends thousands of miles away. Machines wash your clothes and keep your abundant food cold or cook it for you.

In Greek mythology, young Icarus tried to fly with wings of feathers and wax, but he flew too high toward the sun, and the wax melted and dropped him into the sea. You, on the other hand, can board an enormous silver tube, settle in a chair that reclines, fly miles high, perhaps take a little nap, and a few hours later arrive in another city, even another country.

The sultans of old, with all their jewels and gold, could never have even imagined the luxuries we take for granted. We live the most amazing and blessed lives of any people at any time in history.

And that's just the *stuff*, in addition to the safety and love that surround you. Even if 10 percent of your life isn't

going the way you'd like it to, that other 90 percent is marvelous.

An attitude of gratitude is the single thing that can most contribute to your happiness and joy in life. It has been said that the most important prayer is "thank you."

Notice the world with all your senses.

Inhale, look, touch, taste, listen, enjoy.

We are sensual creatures from birth. Unfortunately, as we grow up society rewards us for thinking and performing, not for being still and enjoying. I truly believe that if everyone would take a five-minute appreciation break every couple of hours to drink in *life* the world would be much better. And safer.

The Science Channel often broadcasts programs about the universe, or the mini-universes inside our bodies or in our gardens. Those shows can thrill the wondering, awestruck kid inside you. But then, so can looking at an ant bed or the heart of a flower.

Listen to the birds, notice the colors of the season, breathe in the newly-washed air after the storm passes.

I know this sounds hokey, but forgive me. I just adore taking up great scoops of life and rubbing them all over myself.

Organize something, even a drawer.

Instant gratification. Just a little drawer. Don't go crazy and start to rip your closet apart, unless you really want

to, in which case, remember D, Discard Your Unloved Garments.

This is a good time to get out the kitchen timer and dedicate short bursts of energy to getting organized. You can do anything, no matter how odious, for twenty minutes, and you'll feel so virtuous afterward.

Post chores for your housemates, whatever age.

Don't tote the whole load. Whoever shares your digs, be they three or sixty-three, can damn well pull their own weight. A three-year-old can put away his toys and help set the table, and so can a sixty-three-year-old.

Of course, it may be easier to enroll the toddler. If that's the case, try saying to the person who's eye-level with you: "Hey, we are two grown-ups here, so let's decide who gets to do what. We can always swap chores next week if we want to."

Every mother knows it's easier and faster to make the kid's bed than get him to do it, but don't waver. If he leaves his teddy bear under the covers, make a joke of it: "Whoops, what's that lump? It's *teddy*!" Then you can slowly and gently teach him how to make it better.

Hospital corners we'll postpone till another day.

Quiet your spirit with a Time Out.

Never underestimate the power of a nap.

Maybe you've read news lately about the rejuvenation

properties of the power nap. Just twenty minutes of cat-napping can restore your body and spirit. So can prayer, meditation, staring into space.

Count down from ten to one (again), and let your eyes grow heavy and your body relax. If your monkey mind starts to chatter or propose a to-do list, just gently bring your attention back to quietude.

Imagine you are sitting on the steps of a swimming pool, down at the baby end. You are watching a little beach ball floating on the water in front of you. If it starts to drift away, just gently steer it back. You can do the same thing with wandering focus.

See? It's that simple.

Reclaim your space or create a new one.

Sometimes we feel invaded, even by loved ones. My little sister and I used to share a bed, and we'd each claim the other was over the "line." We agreed that the invisible dividing line started at the middle of the headboard, but we differed dramatically about its angle toward the bottom of the bed.

Even in a crowded apartment, we're each entitled to a special drawer or shelf or cigar box of crayons. Claim your territory, child!

Marsha did it with aroma. When the smell of bacon and onions filled her new digs, they were hers. You decide what claiming ritual fits for you.

Swap or share tasks with a buddy.

This is actually part two of C, Call on Your Friends. I used to live down the street from a woman who hated cleaning house almost as much as I did. We developed a strategy: one morning a week I watched her clean hers, and another morning she watched me clean mine. Neither watcher turned a hand to help, but the company was priceless and made the chores sweep by, so to speak.

When my children were little, my best friend was Aline, whose kids were in the same order as mine: girl, girl, boy. (Hers were a year or so older, which created a hand-me-down clothing bonanza for my three.) Toward the end of the month when grocery money was tight, we would combine resources and make a dinner for our two families. Then we'd bed the six kids down here and there, and we four parents would play cards for a while. I still cherish the memory of that friend/partnership. A buddy like that can make parenting, partnering, and just living less tedious and more fun.

Tape your favorite upbeat songs and sing along.

Here are some of mine.

"Joy to the World," by Three Dog Night (an oldie but goodie)

"Secret of Life," by James Taylor.

"What a Wonderful World," by Louis Armstrong

"Razzle-Dazzle," from the movie *Chicago*

“Shiny Happy People,” by REM
“Cracklin’ Rosie,” by Neil Diamond
“You Can Love Yourself,” by Keb Mo
“I’m Havin’ a Good Time,” by that fabulous old blues
singer Alberta Hunter

Use shortcuts—easier meals, simpler get-ready.

The frozen food section has some real finds, including packages of mesquite-grilled chicken tenders. Thaw a few, throw them onto prewashed salad greens, add a tomato and some green onions, toss with dressing, and you’re good to go.

Put a little olive oil in the bottom of a big pot, sauté cumin seed and onion, then add a quart or two of boxed chicken or vegetable stock, a big can of diced tomatoes, and whatever veggies you have on hand. Now add the secret ingredient: a big glug of bottled salsa (I like Pace, but then, I’m from Texas). Simmer for about twenty minutes or until veggies are cooked. Voila! Impromptu Vegetable Soup.

You’ve got your own pet slam-dunk meals. Consider sharing the recipes (if you can call them that) with friends, and gather theirs.

Then there is what Peg Bracken in her *I Hate to Cook Book* called the Ham in Residence. Or it can be a turkey breast or a big roasted hen you snagged precooked at the store. These stand-bys can be whacked on for several days, until the spirit moves you to actually cook.

Any child aged three and up can choose his or her own clothes for tomorrow. There's just one rule: you have to really let the kid pick them and lay them out. Never mind if her combinations are atrocious. Who cares? The teacher doesn't, the other kids don't, and when she is CEO of a large corporation in the future, no one is going to black-mail her about how she dressed in kindergarten.

Anything you can do to make life easier has my wholehearted blessing, as long as it doesn't do actual harm to anyone. The secret to happily raising kids, or writing a thesis, or weaving a rug, is to lower your standards about petty things like table dust.

Value your solitude.

The whole universe flows and ebbs. Ebbing is very nice. I wish we all had a little cottage in the woods we could hole up in sometimes and turn off the world. I still miss mine. However, there are other ways you can get that alone time.

Just tell the people you live with that they're on their own for the next hour or two, hang out a "Do Not Disturb" sign on your bedroom doorknob, and pile up in bed with a good book, DVD, telephone, or whatever getaway device you choose. Assure the others that they have the right to do the same sometimes, as long as the dog gets fed and homework gets done.

I am a passionate believer in ebbing. It's how you recharge our batteries.

Look back at the guided fantasy process in Chapter Nine: The Great Escape. Whether you call it self-hypnosis, meditation, or just an imagination trip, it is a marvelous way to ebb.

Write yourself a letter.

In case of depression, break seal.

You read about it in Chapter Two. It saved my life, or at least my heart. It can work wonders for you, too. Just remember to write it with compassion and supportive love to the part of you who's scared, lonely, or sad.

The letter reminds you that you're not alone and that there's a future infinitely better than whatever is currently bringing you down.

Xerox great cartoons.

Collect them. Send them to friends.

I subscribe to an online comics site that sends me *Calvin and Hobbes* each morning. Even though we own and have read every *Calvin and Hobbes* book ever put out, we still get a howl out of them. Like the one where the school bully says, "I'm gonna pound you, Twinkie." Calvin answers, "Oh yeah? You'd better be nice to me, Moe. Some day my tax dollars will be paying for your prison cell." *Pow!* Moe flattens him. A tattered Calvin mutters into the ground, "My whole problem is, my lips move when I think."

One of Robert's favorites has the following exchange. Calvin: "Know what I pray for? The strength to change what I can, the inability to accept what I can't, and the incapacity to tell the difference." Hobbes: "You should lead an interesting life." Calvin: "Oh, I already *do*!"

My sister's all-time favorite cartoon is from the *New Yorker*. It shows two ragged prisoners hopelessly chained hand and foot to the stone wall of a torture tower, high above evil-looking guys who are heating up the branding irons. One prisoner says to the other, "Now here's my plan."

Another one I love was by Helen Hokinson in an old *New Yorker*. It shows a well-dressed matron pushing a wheelchair occupied by an apparently able-bodied young man. She says haughtily, "Of course my son *can* walk. Thank God he doesn't have to." When I tell it to therapy clients, they get it that encouraging someone's dependence can eventually take away his ability to function, besides keeping the wheelchair pusher stuck for life.

Yield to healthy temptation more often.

Let me rephrase that. Yield to temptation more often, period. You get to decide what's healthy, unhealthy, or just a little naughty. In my book, getting drunk more than twice a year is unhealthy, but eating a Hershey's kiss every day is just a little naughty. You decide for yourself.

Zero in on all the ways your Big Girl takes care of your Little Girl, *and vice versa*.

What's that? The Little Girl as caretaker too? Actually, she is the keeper of the key to the garden. Cherish her, protect her, and she'll show you the way in.

Down in Wonderland, Alice spied a glass table on which lay a tiny golden key. She searched until she found the little door it fit, opened it, and looked in at the loveliest garden imaginable, with beautiful flowers and sparkling fountains. But alas, she was too big to fit through the door; she couldn't even get her head in.

She sighed and put the key back on the table, but now she found a little bottle labeled "Drink Me." This whole world was so odd that she decided to do just that, and suddenly she began to shrink till she was only ten inches tall. Now she could enter the garden! But the key was high above her on the table, and she couldn't climb up its slippery glass legs, though she tried till she exhausted herself. To me the story is a perfect parable of how it takes both Big Girl Panties and Little Girl Britches to enter the garden. When your grown-up thinking connects with your inner heart, you can go just about anywhere you want.

Enjoy the trip!

Chapter Fourteen:

In Defense of Little Girl Britches



We don't stop playing because we grow old.
We grow old because we stop playing.
—George Bernard Shaw

Who turned off delight?

When you were a toddler (great word!) you found delight in almost everything. Your job was to learn about this world you'd been plunked down into, and you were overjoyed with experimenting.

You loved to splat your hands in the dog's water bowl, check out stuff with your fingers and mouth, bang and unfold and peer and taste and shriek.

Delight was turned on, glowing brightly in your wonderful, fervent little spirit.

Who turned off delight? You did, for very sound reasons. You turned it off in order to make it in the world around you, to please the authority folks, to be found acceptable or stay out of trouble, or maybe, literally, to save your life.

You learned to be “appropriate.” You developed what you thought were your Big Girl Panties, not realizing you were still a Little Girl trying to get along.

Parents feel an enormous responsibility to prepare their children for adult life. You’re probably doing the same to yours, to help them learn what’s socially acceptable. The problem is, sometimes those kids grow up to be so terribly appropriate that they don’t have a lot of fun. They mean to, but there just doesn’t seem to be time for much foolishness or even pleasure. They get *stuck* in their Big Girl Panties or Big Boy Britches and have an awful time trying to have fun. How’s that for a paradox?

I recently visited San Diego, a paradise of a city. Down by the beach there was a percussion group, about eighteen people playing various kinds of drums. Each drum had its own distinct voice. The musicians were playing an ask-and-answer kind of rhythm, talking drums. The leader had a loud whistle in his mouth the whole time, and when he blew it, the conversation of drums shifted tempo, as if the subject had gotten changed.

People sat on the sea wall and listened, but a couple of toddlers and I seemed to be the only ones jiggling our bodies to the rhythms. Sometimes it’s delicious to be immature.

The power is still on inside you! Punch out, shift gears, blow bubbles, eat more finger food, slurp a peach, run naked through the sprinkler, make something from scratch, pick flowers and bring them to your beloved.

S-l-o-w down.

Put your Little Girl Britches on and play. *Turn delight back on!*

Love life, engage in it, give it all you've got. Love it with a passion, because life truly does give back, many times over, what you put into it.

—Maya Angelou

About the Author



Roz Van Meter is a psychotherapist, marriage counselor, certified sex therapist, life coach, and West Texas storyteller. She says it's not her hairdresser's fault if her Texas roots are always showing through her red hair.

For over twenty years she has told stories, her own and others', to inspire clients to grow up, handle life, and laugh with affection at themselves and life in general.

She has been a life strategist and personal coach to writers, CEOs, real estate developers, stay-at-home moms, designers, and career-changing entrepreneurs from as far away as Australia, Germany, Norway, Hawaii, and Canada.

Roz is also the author of:

- *Life Savor: How to Turn on Delight*
- *Passion! Reclaiming the Fire in Your Heart*
- *Sizzling Sex in 30 Days*, an ebook

Visit Roz on her website: www.RozVanMeter.com.

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